

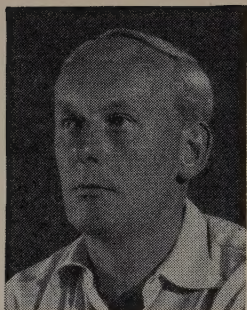
PENGUIN BOOKS.

Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal and other stories



H. E. Bates

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Mark Gerson

Born in 1905, H. E. Bates was educated at Kettering Grammar School and worked as a journalist before publishing his first book, *The Two Sisters*, when he was twenty. In the next fifteen years he won a distinguished reputation for his stories about English country life. In 1941, as 'Flying Officer X', he wrote his two famous books of short stories – *The Greatest People in the World* and *How Sleep the Brave* – which were followed in 1944 by *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. These, and his subsequent novels of Burma, *The Purple Plain* and *The Jacaranda Tree*, and of India, *The Scarlet Sword*, stemming directly or indirectly from his war experience in the East, won him a new reputation and, apart from their success in Britain and America, have been translated into sixteen foreign languages. Among his later books *The Feast of July* and two of his humorous trilogy of books about the Larkin family have appeared in Penguins. H. E. Bates lives in Kent.

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PENGUIN BOOKS

1819

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL
AND OTHER STORIES

H. E. BATES



*Now Sleeps
the Crimson Petal*

AND OTHER STORIES

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PENGUIN BOOKS
IN ASSOCIATION WITH
MICHAEL JOSEPH

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The Enchantress

NEARLY fifty years ago I knew her as a rather plump, fair-skinned child with eyes of brilliant hyacinth blue and long ribbonless blonde hair that hung half-way down her back in curls.

Her mother was a gaunt, hungry faced, prematurely aged woman who, with sickly yellow eyes sunk far into her head behind steel-rimmed spectacles, treadled feverishly all day and half the night at a sewing machine, in a black dress and apron, closing boot uppers, in the dirty window of a little house in one of the narrow yards we used as short cuts at the railway end of the town. Her father was an ex-pug grown coarse and fat who worked little, boozed a lot and spent most of his time in a pub called 'The Waterloo, re-telling for friends and strangers alike the story of how – incredibly as a light-weight – he had won impermanent fame and a silver belt as a champion twenty years before.

On Sundays her mother skulked furtively to Methodist Chapel, wearing a black dress that might well have been the one she worked in, an old black straw hat without trimmings and black button boots worn badly down at the heel, looking like the poorest of the poor. In a town like Evensford, where boots and shoes are made, even the poor have no way of acquiring public derision more swiftly than to be seen in boots or shoes that badly need heeling. It is not merely a point of honour not to do such

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things; it incurs a sharp communal scorn. But no one felt either scorn or derision for Mrs Jackson. Nor did anyone ever seem to know the cause of her state of perpetual mourning, but as the years went past I guessed – correctly – that it was not mourning at all. She was merely saving for Bertha.

The yard in which they lived was no more than a slum alley eight or nine feet wide and only those who lived there knew what went on behind the narrow back ways that, bounded by fearsome little privies on either side, were no more than naked asphalt squares from which the fences had been ripped down. That stretch of the town, low down by the station, was called The Pit. To come from The Pit was the social equivalent of having leprosy. Sometimes a deaf mute, a scrawny wild-eyed man of thirty or so, stood guarding the upper end of it, making the noises of a caged animal and spitting at passers-by. It was a place of loafers playing crown-and-anchor under smoky walls, of yelling women in perpetual curling rags and men's caps who leered down to The Waterloo with beer jugs in their hands and made twice-weekly visits, with rattling prams, to pop-shops.

On Mondays Bertha's mother went to the pop-shop too; on Saturdays she redeemed whatever she had pawned. It is my guess that she went about in apparently perpetual mourning only because whatever clothes she otherwise possessed were in almost eternal pawn. And they were there because of Bertha.

Even as early as these days they started calling Bertha the princess. At ten she was already big for her age. She had already a clean, splendid sumptuous bloom about her.

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Her eyes were most wonderfully clear and brilliant, with a great touch of calm and candid pride about them. Her hair was magnificent. It is quite common to see young girls with hair of palest bleached yellow and of extraordinary lightness in texture, but Bertha was the only child I ever saw whose hair was the colour of thistledown and of exactly the same lovely insubstantial airy quality.

She was always beautifully dressed. It used to be said that her mother, sitting up into the small hours or surreptitiously working on Sunday afternoons, made all her dresses for her, but years later I met a woman, one of two sisters, the proprietress of a very good class dress shop at the other end of the town, who said:

‘Oh! no: Bertha’s clothes all came from here. We made them for her, my sister and I. And her underclothes. I suppose it would surprise you to know that that child never had anything but pillow lace on her petticoats? And always paid for.’

At thirteen she already looked like a girl of sixteen or seventeen. She was tall, with full sloping shoulders and a firm high bust. Her legs were the sort of legs that make men turn round in the street, at least once if not twice, and she had a certain languid way of swinging her arms, with a backward graceful pull, as she walked. All this time her mother sat at the little window in the yard, treadling with sick desperation, almost insanely, at the sewing machine, and her father sat in *The Waterloo*, working his way through the chronicles of his history as a light-weight. You never saw them together.

At fourteen she put her hair up. There was a good deal of it – it had been her mother’s eternal pride never to cut

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it at all – and now, not so light in colour, though still very blonde and airy in texture, it made her seem an inch or two taller, giving her better proportions.

By this time she was working in a boot factory. In those days women went to work in the oldest clothes they could find, pretty shabbily sometimes and often in the sort of thin black apron that Bertha's mother wore, but Bertha went to the factory exactly as she had previously gone to school: with her own impeccable quality, beautifully, fastidiously dressed.

Already, by now, she looked like a young woman of twenty, and already, people began to say, you could see all the old, eternal danger signs. It was only a question of time before girls of sensational early maturity found themselves in trouble, disgraced and tasting the fruits of bitter unlearned lessons. Girls of fourteen who went out of their way to look like women of twenty, dealing in the deliberate coinage of voluptuous attractions, had only themselves to blame if they bought what they asked for. The time had come for Bertha's fall.

Just under three years later she astounded everybody by suddenly getting married – quite undisgraced – to a retired leather dresser with a modest income, a most respectable Edwardian house enclosed by an orchard of apple and pear trees, and a taste for driving out in a landau in straw hat and cream alpaca suit, on summer afternoons.

William James Sherwood was a neat, courteous, decorous man of the old school, very gentlemanly and of quiet habits; and the whole thing was a sensation. No one could say how it happened.

‘But she comes from ‘The Pit!’ they said. ‘She’s from

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The Pit! From *there*. And seventeen. How do you suppose it happened? What possessed him?’

When a man of seventy marries a girl of seventeen who is remarkably mature, fastidious, and beautiful for her age it never seems to occur to anyone that all that has possessed him is a firm dose of taste, enterprise, and common sense. Consequently it did not occur to anyone that William Sherwood might have made, in Bertha, a good bargain for himself.

‘But she’s from The Pit!’ they kept saying. ‘She works in a factory. And the way she walks. The way she fancies herself. She isn’t his kind. She can’t be. Look who she comes from – the poorest of the poor. Her mother scraping and saving at shoe-work, her old man cooked every day in The Waterloo.’

Presently Bertha was to be seen driving out with William James Sherwood in a landau on fine summer afternoons. By the way she sat there, upright, composed, holding a parasol over her head, one hand resting lightly and decorously on the side of the carriage, you could have supposed that she had rarely done anything else but drive in landaus for the better part of her seventeen years. But there was something else still more surprising and more interesting about her. She looked supremely content and happy.

For the next three years she went on matching herself, her ways, and her appearance to William James Sherwood. She behaved more like a woman contentedly settled in her middle thirties who had been born and brought up in a quiet country house, of good family, than a girl still in her teens who had been brought up in The Pit, on pawn-shop

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bread. Sometimes in summer you would see her not only driving out in the landau but walking, quietly, slowly, and in thoughtful conversation, with William James Sherwood, in the orchard of apples and pears. They looked like a couple locked in the most harmonious tranquillity. It was easy to see that he was fond of her. His ways had obviously become her ways. In the swiftest and most unobtrusive fashion the daughter of The Pit, the child of the coarse ex-pug, had become a good wife, leaving all trace of any other self behind.

Then suddenly, when she was twenty, James William Sherwood slipped from a ladder while pruning a pear-tree, fell to a concrete path below and died of a haemorrhage two days later.

'Now watch her,' everybody said. 'She's got what she wanted. Now watch her let it rip. Now watch her slide.'

Sherwood died in January. One very hot oppressive evening in the following July I was walking slowly through the town, up to the tennis club, when a low green open sports car cut a corner as I was crossing, almost killing me, and then roared away through rapid changes of gears and the guttural grind of twin exhausts. I had just time to catch sight of a man named Tom Pemberton at the wheel, and a very fair, bare-headed girl with one arm round his neck, before the car cut another corner and disappeared.

It was some minutes before it came to me that the girl was Bertha, and the fact that I hadn't recognized her instantly was due to an interesting thing. Bertha had bobbed her hair. Twenty minutes later I walked into the tennis

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club and found her playing tennis with Pemberton and a man named Saunders and another girl whose name I can't remember. Saunders was a rather surly, dark-eyed man of great virility who played tennis well above the local average and Pemberton, though a fool in all other respects, was as polished and fluent a player as you ever get in an ordinary club.

I was still trying to recover from my astonishment that Bertha was playing as well as any of them – in fact from my astonishment that she could play tennis at all – when I saw that Tom Pemberton had been drinking. Though not actually drunk, he threw the ball in the air several times and missed it and once, missing a smash, he fell headlong into the net and lay underneath it cursing and giggling. Every time he did something of this kind Bertha started giggling too.

It was plain, presently, to see that Saunders was tiring of this and soon they were exchanging, hotly, some words about a ball being on the wrong side of the line. Pemberton, I thought, was less drunk than stupid. But Saunders was not the kind of man who took any kind of argument very lightly and presently, surly as a mongrel, he hit a ball deliberately high over the shrubberies and into the street beyond.

The next thing I realized was that Pemberton was walking off the court, followed by a cool, racy, slightly haughty Bertha who looked, I thought, more striking than ever. But this was not what impressed me, at that moment, most powerfully.

What impressed me so much was that she had trained herself to Pemberton's pattern. She no longer looked like

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a woman nestling down into the contentment of her middle thirties. Though she was now a widow she looked with her close-bobbed hair, severe twentyish tennis frock, her low waist and short skirt that showed her magnificent legs to superb advantage, like a careless wild-headed girl of seventeen.

Five minutes later they were roaring away in Pemberton's sports car and older members of the club began to say, prophetically as it turned out, that Pemberton would kill himself before he was much older. And I actually heard her scream – with delight, not fear – as the car skidded round a bend.

I never cared much for Pemberton or indeed for men of Pemberton's upbringing, outlook, and class. Tom was the only son of a wealthy boot-manufacturer who lived in a house of hideous chateau-like design surrounded by large conservatories with occasional diamonds of coloured glass in them. He had no need to be anything but empty-headed, and the father encouraged the condition by ceaseless indulgence with sports cars, open cheques, expensive suits, and the ready payment of court fines whenever, as so often happened, Tom ran the sports car into lamp-posts, trees or even other sports cars. Drunk or sober, he always looked pitifully handsome, vacant, vain, and without direction.

It occurred to me – I don't know why – that Bertha, who had married so unexpectedly and quietly into the gentility of James William Sherwood's septuagenarian household behind the pear-trees, was the very person to dispossess him of these unlikeable characteristics, I was wrong.

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It was many years indeed before I grasped that Bertha never dispossessed anybody of anything. The truth about Bertha was in fact very slow in coming to me. All I thought I saw in the incident of the tennis club was a girl who, consorting with an idiot, had caught a rash of idiocy. It was too early for me to know that the same characteristics that had turned her temporarily into a decorous wife for an elderly gentleman were the very same as those that were now turning her into a flapper of loud clipped speech, skirts above the knees, and a taste for wild parties at dubious clubs on riversides. Grieflessly, swiftly, and with not the slightest pressure on the nerves of conscience she had slipped out of the part of widow as easily as she might have slipped out of one of her petticoats, taking on the new tone, new pattern, and new outlook of another man.

About a year later Tom Pemberton, driving his car home very late and very fast one night in a thunderstorm, with Bertha at his side, crashed into a roadside tree for the last time.

By one of those strange tricks that surround violent and accidental death Pemberton was terribly mutilated while Bertha, thrown clear, landed with miraculous gentleness on grass, dazed but unbruised, as if she had slid gently down a helter-skelter at a fair.

Only a few weeks later a great scandal broke out in the town.

Bertha, by this time, had gone back to live with her mother in The Pit. It might have been supposed that the few hundred pounds James William Sherwood had left her would have revolutionized life behind the dark little

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front window and the treadle sewing machine. Nothing of the kind had happened. The sick, yellow-eyed figure went on treadling as desperately as ever; in The Waterloo the ex-pug unfolded to all who would listen his tale of lightweight triumphs; and Bertha, splendid and well dressed as ever, went back to the factory.

Two or three days after the death of Tom Pemberton a young curate named Ormsby-Hill called to see Bertha in The Pit, bearing the conventional condolences of the clergy and hoping, after the crash and its mutilations, that all was well as could be expected. Clergymen have a strange habit of calling on their sheep at awkward times and Ormsby-Hill, getting no answer at the front door of the house, which no one ever used anyway, went round to the back, among the miserable naked yards, just after six o'clock. The ex-pug, by that time, was already in The Waterloo, and Bertha's mother, free for a few minutes after the long day of treadling, was out doing shopping.

Bertha, big arms and chest bare in a sleeveless chemise, was at the kitchen sink, washing away her factory grime.

'Oh! come in if you can get in,' she said. She clearly remembered the young curate at Tom Pemberton's funeral. 'I'm afraid the kitchen's in a mess. Can you find a chair in the living-room?'

Ormsby-Hill sat down in the little living-room while Bertha, entirely unaffected, finished washing and drying herself in the kitchen. It was never very clear to me, nor I think to anyone else, why Ormsby-Hill had entered the church. He was in all ways the complete opposite of the young curate of convention. Big, bovine, sensuous-lipped,

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fond of beer and rugby football, he belonged to that class of clergymen, not I think so common now, who thought godliness should be muscular, and the way to heaven a hearty free-for-all. He thought the gospel went down much better from clergymen who offered it while dressed in tweeds rather than dog collars, with pints of foaming ale in their hands rather than crucifixes, and by means of sportsmen's services, sometimes actually held in pubs, where the congregation was roughly addressed as 'chaps'.

That evening he had gone to The Pit in trepidation, with some idea that Bertha was a wild bad girl. Nobody liked going down to The Pit if they didn't have to, and Ormsby-Hill had been deliberately sent there on a distasteful errand by a vicar too squeamish to stomach the sordid alleyway of privies, louts playing crown-and-anchor on the asphalt, and the deaf-mute keeping guard for a stray policeman at the top of the yard.

His surprise at seeing Bertha was very great. His surprise at hearing her voice for the first time was even greater.

With Tom Pemberton it had become a shrill, empty, fun-at-any-price sort of voice; during her marriage to James William Sherwood it had been a decorous, sympathetic toned-down voice of charm and understanding.

When Ormsby-Hill heard it for the first time it was a smooth, throaty voice, easy and rather casual: as if she had already decided what voice he would like her to have.

'I'll slip upstairs and put on a dress if you don't mind waiting,' she said. 'I won't be five minutes. I have to be at the dressmaker's by seven anyway.'

When she came down, about five minutes later, she was

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wearing a sleeveless yellow dress with a low neck and a very short skirt and with it white cotton gloves and white high-heeled shoes. She was very fond of white and yellow clothes and once or twice later I used to see her in this dress. It was tight and smooth across her thighs and so short that it showed her pretty rounded knees to great advantage. She hardly ever wore a hat in those days – she really didn't need to because the fine close-trimmed blonde hair was shaped exactly like a hat itself – and the low-cut neck of the dress, in the fashion of the time, showed a deep curve of soft low breast, the skin clear, unblemished, and wonderfully smooth.

When Ormsby-Hill saw her come downstairs into the dingy little living room he forgot almost at once what he had come to say to her. She was already drawing on her gloves and she said:

‘I'm awfully afraid I shall have to go. My dressmaker closes at half past seven and I have to have this fitting. I don't know which way you're going back, but it's only in the High Street, this shop, if you'd like to walk that way.’

Walking down the yard, out of The Pit, he managed to repeat a few words of conventional condolence about Tom Pemberton, asking her at the same time how she herself was.

‘It was very sad,’ she said, ‘but I don't remember much about it.’

‘I believe you also suffered another unfortunate bereavement,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Some time ago.’

By the time they were out in the street she was talking

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easily, lightly, and readily of something else, quite unperturbed and sometimes laughing. She had a laugh that had a kind of spring to it. It uncoiled suddenly and lightly, ending in a series of high shimmering notes, merrily, like repeated echoes.

And as he walked with her that evening through a High Street still crowded with late shoppers, Ormsby-Hill could hardly bring himself to believe that he was with a young woman who had lost a husband and a lover in so short a time. Nor was there the slightest sign of the wild, bad girl he had expected. He felt indeed that he had never met anyone quite so pleasant to talk to, to look at or to listen to. Above all he couldn't believe – it was simply incomprehensible – that she had been born, bred, and shaped in The Pit. It made his head rock with wonder that she had come, so golden and impeccable and pleasant, from that sordid rat-hole.

He fell in love with her at once, with abandonment, quite blindly, and she let him fall in love for precisely the same reason as she had let James William Sherwood and Tom Pemberton fall in love: because it was natural, because it was pleasant and because she liked it.

The scandal warmed and mounted quickly. It was one thing for a young curate to be seen in occasional conversation with a good-looking girl or even to dance with her at one of those decorous functions by which the church, in the nineteen-twenties, had begun to lure youth back into the grace of the fold; but it was quite another for Ormsby-Hill to be seen waiting for her at the factory door, often at the dinner hour and almost always at night, and then walking home to The Pit with her through the rushing

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crowds of shoemakers hungrily herding homewards on foot or on bicycles.

‘He comes of such a good family. He went to Oxford. His mother lives in a big house in Wiltshire. And Bertha – from The Pit. From *there*! What do you suppose the vicar thinks? And his mother? He doesn’t wear the dog-collar very often, does he? I suppose he’s ashamed.’

Ormsby-Hill, strangely, was not ashamed. He existed boldly, for an entire autumn, a winter, and part of the following spring, in a state of suspended enchantment. And Bertha in turn rewarded him as she had rewarded James William Sherwood and Tom Pemberton: with the sort of affection that moulds itself on the pattern of the receiver. If it is possible to imagine her as being sensuous in well-cut tweeds that was how she looked that autumn, winter, and spring. And she looked like that and dressed like that for a sound simple reason: because Ormsby-Hill loved her and because he wanted her to. She also went to church, though her mother was a Methodist and went to chapel, and watched him take part in the services and listened to him preaching and reading the lessons. She took on also some of his accent, slightly Oxford, his phrases, and his muscular mannerisms. She was sometimes to be seen in country pubs outside the town, drinking from large tankards of draught ale, laughing with ravishing heartiness and saying such things as:

‘Darling, how could you? You’re too, too awful. You’re really shame-making, honestly you are. Really shy-making. All right, pet, let’s have another. Why not?’

Suddenly, in the June of that year, there was no longer a Rev. Ormsby-Hill in the town, though down in Corn-

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wall, in a remote rocky village isolated on the coast, a new congregation was getting ready to welcome a new curate in September.

'One dead. One killed. One disgraced,' people said. 'Who's she going to ruin next?'

Nobody seemed to understand that, down in The Pit, it was not Bertha's place to give an answer.

I, in part, gave it instead.

She was now, like the century, in her twenties. It was the bright-gay, desperate time. There was much dancing.

She was always the central figure at dances, seldom wearing the same dress twice, always strikingly golden, elegant, friendly, in demand. Perhaps the friendliness was the nicest thing about her. She never refused the clumsiest lout a quick-step. She waltzed on equal terms with youth, age, undergraduates, shoe-hands, golfers, shooting men, clerks, masters of foxhounds, always beautifully companionable, at ease, talking whatever language they spoke to her.

And presently, the following summer, she was even dancing with me.

It was a very hot sultry evening in early July and some of the men, after the habit of the twenties, were wearing blazers and white flannels. Most of the girls were in light silk or satin frocks and the doors and windows of the dance hall were all wide open and you could see the blue brilliant evening beyond.

I had just decided to disentangle myself from the hot sea-crab embraces of a *Paul Jones* when suddenly the music

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stopped and I found myself, by pure accident, facing Bertha, almost isolated on that corner of the floor.

She smiled and at once raised her bare golden arms towards me. Both the smile and the gesture might have been those between two old friends, though we had in fact never even spoken before.

She was dressed, that evening, in striking oyster-coloured silk. The dress was short and sleeveless, in the fashion of the day, and she had matching gloves and shoes. Her eyes, naturally very blue, seemed to catch in reflection all the brilliance of the evening outside, so that they appeared to be deep violet in colour. Her hair looked as if she had spent most of the day brushing it and she had now begun to let it grow a little longer again, so that it hung down in the shape of a casque.

She danced superbly. But what really struck me, in that hot, saxophonic scrum of pounding feet, was not her dancing. It was her coolness. Sweat was pouring heavily from the faces of all the men and now and then you could see across the back of a girl's dress the huge wet hamprint of a hand.

Bertha's arms and hands were, by contrast, as cool as porcelain cups dipped in spring water.

'Enjoying it?' I said.

'Oh! awfully,' she said, 'aren't you?'

I confessed I felt it rather warm and then she said:

'I hear you've started to become a writer.'

'Oh?' I said. 'Who told you that?'

'As a matter of fact I read an article of yours the other day,' she said. 'About flowers. I cut it out because I liked it so much.'

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After that it was impossible not to be happily at ease with her, friendly and greatly flattered. To my dismay the music stopped almost immediately. The dance had ended. She immediately gave me a wonderful smile of thanks and I had the presence of mind to ask her if she would like some ice-cream and if she would have the next dance with me.

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘How nice of you.’

Over the ice-cream, which we took outside to eat, she said:

‘About those flowers. They weren’t from our part of the country, were they?’

‘Most of them.’

‘But the orchids? – I didn’t know we had orchids in this country. Do they grow here – the wild ones you said were like greeny white butterflies?’

‘In Longley Spinneys,’ I said, ‘just outside the town.’

‘Honestly?’

She licked the last of her ice-cream from the spoon and looked at me with, I thought, an air of disbelief.

‘You don’t believe it,’ I said.

‘Oh! I don’t want you to think that,’ she said. ‘Please.’

I have always found that women are frequently most incredulous when you tell them the truth. I have also always been, all my life, a person governed by the swiftest, if sometimes the most foolish, impulses.

‘If you don’t believe me I’ll take you to see them,’ I said. ‘They’re in bloom now.’

‘Oh! that’s lovely,’ Bertha said. ‘When should we go?’

‘Now,’ I said.

The wide dark blue eyes did not look in the least sur-

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prised. It was only when I suddenly remembered that I was talking to a girl whose late habit had been to ride both in landaus and in cars of fast sporting design that I was aware of a stupid object standing in the way of what I had just proposed.

‘Damn,’ I said. ‘I forgot I’d only got my bicycle.’

Her reply was typical.

‘What’s wrong with a bicycle?’ she said. ‘I haven’t got mine but I could ride on the back of yours.’

Suddenly I knew I had made the first of several new discoveries about Bertha. I knew now that she was not merely beautiful, sumptuous, companionable, and physically delightful. She had an altogether wonderful innocence about her.

‘Come on, let’s go,’ she said. ‘Before we change our minds.’

‘All right,’ I said, ‘but you ride the bike and I’ll step it on the back. In case you soil your dress or tear your stockings.’

There are an infinite number of ways of making love to a girl for the first time but the approach from the back of a bicycle, on a hot half-dark summer night is, I suppose, not among the most common of them.

The road to Longley Spinneys is a fairly flat one and the actual business of bicycling was not hard for Bertha. It was I who had the difficult job of keeping my balance on the back and at first I rode with my hands on her bare cool shoulders.

‘Are my hands heavy for you up there?’ I said. ‘Say if they are.’

‘Just a little heavy.’

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I put my hands round her waist.

'Is that better?'

'Much better.'

As we rode I could smell the fragrance of hay from summer meadows, the lightest of scents from hedge-roses, and from somewhere farther off, in the hot darkness, the deeper, thicker breath of limes. By the time we were coasting down the last small incline to the spinneys, in that soundless intoxicating air, my hands were holding her breasts. They were firm and corsetless and my mouth was resting against her bare smooth shoulder.

It was the most exquisite bicycle ride ever undertaken, but as we stood by the woodside she made no comment on any of these happenings. They were perfectly natural to her. Soon I started to kiss her. I let my hands run over the cool sumptuous skin of her shoulders. In exquisite suspense, with closed eyes, I forgot the orchids. I thought she had forgotten them too but at last, in a low voice, she aroused me from a daze.

'What about these flowers? These orchids?' she said. 'Or did you just invent them?'

I took her into the spinneys. It was still not fully dark; but presently, under the ashlings, we came upon the first of the orchids, rare, fragile, milk-green winged, the ghostliest of flowers. The scent of them was overpoweringly sweet, too sweet, un-English, almost tropical, on the calm night air. 'You must have extraordinary eyes to see them in the dark,' she said. 'Or does the scent guide you?' I had no answer to make to her and for the second or third time, with trembling intoxication, I stopped under a tree, took her in my arms and kissed her. The acquiescence of

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her body was sensational in its quietness. There was not a murmur in the spinneys, the fields, the sky, or the hedgerows about us. I could hear only in my own mind the echo of some words of a poem that had been haunting me since waking and that the later saxophonic pounding cries, the bicycle ride and the orchids had driven temporarily away:

*Dear love, for nothing less than thee
Would I have broke this happy dream.*

She stood, dream-like herself, for a few moments as insubstantial as the flowers she was holding, while I quoted to her with ardent quietness Donne's words about excess of joy. She listened not only as if she had been used all her life to hearing young men quote verse to her at night, in summer woods, but also as she must have listened to those other accents, the accents of James William Sherwood, Tom Pemberton, Ormsby-Hill and the rest, charmingly ready to take on their pattern of speech, just as she was ready, now, to take on mine.

When at length I finished with the last line I could remember,

*Enter these arms, for since thou thoughtst it best
Not to dream all my dream, let's act the rest,*

she laughed softly, throatily, and said:

'Did you write all that? It's lovely.'

'No,' I said and I told her who had written it. 'Three hundred years ago.'

'He was a man who knew about things,' she said. 'Like you with your flowers.'

We rode home, hours later, in a darkness no less sultry

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for the pink, breaking light in the east, the paling stars and a thin rising dew. Towards the end of the journey a few birds had already begun a light July chorus and once a leveret skimmed across in front of the bicycle, almost throwing us, so that I clutched harder, half in self-preservation, at her body. She was even then so acquiescent, so friendly and so full of her own apparent excess of joy that she actually half-turned her head a few moments later and kissed me as we rode.

Presently I took her as far as The Pit in order to say, in the rapidly rising dawn, the tenderest of good-byes.

‘Tomorrow night?’

‘I’m awfully sorry. I can’t tomorrow,’ she said. ‘I’m going out with George Freeman.’

I felt as if I had been hit rudely and ferociously with the bicycle.

‘But Bertha – ’

‘I’m going out with George three nights a week,’ she said, ‘but I’d love to come with you on the others. I would – I love the way you talk. I loved that poetry. I want to hear all about you and your writing.’

It was hard to believe she was still in her early twenties. It was harder still to believe that she could forsake my own particular excess of joy, the verse, the summer woods and the green-ghost orchids for George Freeman, a muscular flat-capped skittles player who drove a brewers’ dray.

A few days later my father started to admonish me.

‘I hear you’ve been seen with that Bertha Jackson girl.’

I started to protest.

‘Oh! yes, I know,’ he said. ‘I daresay she *is* all right.

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She may be. *But that sort of girl can easily trap you.* You understand?’

There was really not much to understand.

‘Probably a good thing,’ my father said, ‘that you’re going to live in London soon.’

A few weeks afterwards, bearing a sheaf of torn, tender memories that already seemed as delicate and hauntingly insubstantial as the milk-green orchids, the ghostliest of flowers, I went to live away from home.

Seventeen years later I stood before the desk of my commanding officer, who had sent for me with some urgency and now said:

‘Didn’t you tell me once, old boy, that you came from the Nene valley? Isn’t that your native country? Evensford?’

When I said that it was he went on:

‘Good show. I think I’ve got a bright idea for a powerful piece for you. The Yanks have carved out a hell of a great bomber airfield just outside Evensford. Wouldn’t it be nice if you went down and looked at it and wrote a nostalgic piece about it? – the revolution of war, the bomb that blew your childhood scene sky-high and that sort of thing? You get it? It would please the Americans.’

I said I thought I got it and he turned with eagerness to a pile of papers.

‘A chap named Colonel Garth F. Parkington, it seems, is Station Commander,’ he said, ‘and H.Q. at Huntingdon say he’s the nicest sort of bloke to deal with. Spend as long as you like up there. Absorb the atmosphere. I’ll lay everything on.’

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A day later I was driving northward, up to my native country. It was early summer. Gipsies were camping about their fires outside a strawberry field that I passed and just inside the field a line of women and children in light cotton dresses were gathering the berries and putting them into white chip baskets. One of the prettier of the girls, a blonde, seeing my uniform, waved her hand to me, laughing, showing clean white teeth, her hands red with strawberry stain. Farther along the road a field of wheat had already the lovely grey-blue sheen of pre-ripeness on the stiff straight ears and I could hear, all along the hedges, whenever I opened the car window, the song of yellow-hammers chipping with monotony at the heart of the sunny afternoon.

Something about the fair-haired girl waving her hand to me from the strawberry field made me remember Bertha. Seventeen years is a longish time and my hair had begun to go grey.

Then presently, as I drove along, I found myself trying to remember the number of times I had heard her name in seventeen years. It was perhaps half a dozen. Someone, I forget who, had once told me that she was seeing a great deal of a prominent follower of the Pytchley; that she was much in the swim at flat race meetings and point-to-points. Someone else thought she was a hostess in a seaside hotel. At least two people thought she had gone to live in London but when I mentioned this to another he said: 'Don't believe it. Bertha's still there, up at Evensford. Still the same as ever. Still going strong.'

About three o'clock I found myself in a completely strange, foreign country. Only by stopping the car, getting

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out and identifying, through some minutes of amazed re-orientation, a slender stone church steeple I had known since boyhood, could I recognize that I had reached, in fact, the frontiers of my native land. Three great hangars, like monstrous brooding night-bats, succeeded in saving from moon-mountain barrenness an otherwise naked skyline. In brilliant sunshine a perimeter track curled across bare grass like a quivering bruising strip of steel. Like black, square-faced owls, Flying Fortresses everywhere rested on land where, as a boy, I had searched for skylarks' eggs, walked in tranquillity on summer Sunday evenings with my family, and gathered cowslips in exalted spring-times.

Over everything swept the unstopped thundering uproar of engines warming up, and dead in the heart of it a giant water-tank, like a Martian ghoul on stilts, strode colossus-wise across the sky. This was the country through which, on a July night, I had bicycled with Bertha, first put my hands with lightness on her breasts and talked to her of dreams and joy's excesses in terms of ghost-green orchid flowers.

A few minutes later I was with Colonel Parkington, a likeable Nordic giant with many ribbons, an immaculate tunic and trousers of expensive light pink whipcord who felt it imperative, every few moments, to call me old boy.

'Sit down, old boy.' A telephone rang on his desk. He picked it up. 'Be right with you, old boy.' A voice began crackling in the telephone. 'Hell. No. Blast. Hell, Christ no.' A second telephone rang. The colonel did not pick it up. 'But what the flaming hell! What does Washington know? Through channels, for Christ's sake? Hell! It takes

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a century.' The second telephone kept ringing and Colonel Parkington, not picking it up, started shouting into the first. 'Always channels. Always channels. They think of nothing but channels. This is an operational station. Dammit, I can't wait! Where do they think this goddam war is being fought? In Albuquerque or where?'

He slammed down the telephone. The second telephone stopped ringing for ten seconds and then, as if taking breath, started again. Colonel Parkington picked it up, put his hand over the mouthpiece and said to me with polite, genuine sorrow:

'Look, old boy. This goes on all day. Every day. It's hell. I tell you what. Go get yourself fixed up with a room. The lieutenant out there will fix you up. Then show up at six o'clock at my house down the road. We're having a little party - about fifty folks, cocktails. I want you to meet my wife. She's English too. O.K.? See you then, old boy.'

Thunder was muttering ominously along the eastern sky-line as I walked down the road soon after six o'clock but its gathering rages were like the squeakings of sick mice compared with the already raucous bawlings coming out of the big Victorian red-brick house that the Colonel had taken for himself about a mile from the bomber station.

Inside, in the big lofty Victorian rooms, it seemed that an army of giant locusts had settled. The species was mainly a laughing one. Between its laughter it sucked at glasses, ate ice-cream, blew smoke, gnawed at small brown sausages, and yelled.

In this maelstrom I sought refuge behind an ancient hat-rack, where a young lieutenant with many ribbons, pale flight-weary eyes, and a glass beer-mug in his hand,

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had already forestalled me. The beer-mug was filled with what seemed to be port wine and the lieutenant, staring up from it, started calling me Bud.

‘Hullo, Bud, what’s the uniform?’

‘Royal Air Force.’

‘Is it? For Christ’s sake.’

Drinking deeply at the port, he wiped his mouth across the back of his hand, staring the uniform up and down.

‘Forgot to put your ribbons on, Bud.’

I explained that I had not only no ribbons to put on but that, so far, I had done nothing whatever to deserve any ribbons.

‘Hell, that’s terrible,’ he said. ‘Don’t look right without ribbons.’

He drank again. I surveyed the smoky locust scene, looking for Colonel Parkington. As I searched unsuccessfully through the crowded gnawing faces the young lieutenant, mouth wet with port, spoke with tense, unsomber bitterness of the day’s events above Stettin.

‘Damn dirty trip,’ he kept saying. ‘A helluva damn stinking dirty trip.’

‘Do you know if Colonel Parkington is here?’ I said.

‘Sure.’

He too surveyed the scene, peering with difficulty from under lids that were closing down on the eyes’ weary dilations.

‘Don’t see him though.’

‘Which is Mrs Parkington?’

Before he could answer a girl came up. She had the fair small-featured elegance that is so common to girls in that part of England and she heard my question.

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‘That’s her,’ she said. ‘Over at the top end of the room. In the black and silver dress. By the fireplace.’

‘Probably the colonel’s there too,’ the lieutenant said. ‘How’s things? How’s the shape?’ he said to the girl, catching her by the shoulder, and I moved away.

Half-way across the room I stopped. The colonel’s personal lieutenant, the one who had arranged my room, stupefied by the sight of a guest without a drink in his hand and thinking perhaps that I had halted in stupefaction too, as in fact I had, dragged me solicitously aside to a long table where mess orderlies were serving drinks from a barricade of ice-buckets.

‘Please have what you like, sir,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t see you come in. The colonel’s not here yet. He had a rush call to H.Q. at five.’

An orderly poured me a drink. I bore it away through the crowd of faces and stood by a wall. I stood there a long time, alone, sipping the drink, watching Mrs Parkington.

There was no mistaking that fine yellow hair. Bertha was wearing it rather long now, almost down to her shoulders, in the wartime fashion, and it matched with its curled brushed smoothness the long close line of the black and silver dress that made her appear even taller than she was. The dress, as always, was low-cut, showing the strong smooth bosom, and she was wearing rather large pear-shaped earrings, black, probably of jet, that quivered every now and then like shining berries as she tossed back her head, laughing.

She was surrounded, on all sides, by young officers in uniform. There were, I noticed, no other women near. With native good sense they had clearly retreated, fearful

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of being overshadowed by a sumptuous, glittering, popular mountain.

At intervals her laugh rang out clear, merry and golden. I hesitated for a long time about moving over towards her but at last I started, setting down my empty glass on a window sill outside which I could see the far blue violence of summer lightning striking the sky above the black hangars on the hill.

I did not get very far. For a second time the horrified lieutenant, alarmed by the sight of a single drinkless guest, stopped me and begged:

‘Let me get you something, sir. They’re not looking after you. The colonel said to be sure to look after you. We don’t get so many visits from you boys.’

He disappeared and I stood for three or four minutes longer within hearing distance of Bertha, waiting for the drink. She spoke, I now discovered, with a slight American accent, just clipped enough to be charming.

‘Oh! it’s all channels, channels,’ I heard her say. ‘Nothing but channels. It’s like Garth says – you’d think they were fighting the war in Albuquerque or somewhere. For goodness’ sake what does Washington know?’

The young officers about her laughed with that particular brittle brand of laughter that young officers reserve for occasions when brass-hats, governments, or cabinet officials are mentioned and one, younger, more good-looking and more tipsy than the rest, gazed with fondness at her bosom, as if almost ready to plant a kiss there, and said:

‘Good for Bertha. My God, we should send Bertha back home as special envoy. She’d knock ’em dead.’

A moment later my drink arrived. I listened to her

laughing and talking for a few moments longer, watching the earrings quiver like black berries against the long yellow hair and then at last, feeling unarmed for the encounter, I moved away.

As I walked back up the road lightning struck with explosive blue tributaries, fierce and jagged, all about the woodless sky-line. I walked slowly in the hot air, carrying my cap, and if I was sad it was not so much because of Bertha, gay and sumptuous as ever, but because, remembering James William Sherwood and Tom Pemberton, I feared that the night's ominous storminess might contain in it the fires of other premonitions.

I need not, as it happened, have worried at all.

The war was hardly over before I was filled with unbearable longings to travel again, to feel what France smelled like and to see flowers blooming about the classical stones of Italy, in fierce sunlight, about the vineyards, high above the lakesides.

These things were still not easy and it was already a year later when I met a man who promptly scorned them, told me of experiences that had given him equal, easier pleasures and said:

'France? Why bother with France? You've got it all in Jersey. No currency nonsense. Everybody speaks English. Pretty good food. And this hotel - I'll write the name of this hotel down for you.'

Jersey is not France; nor are the Channel Islands the hills of Tuscany. I listened with unenraptured patience and with that glassiness of eye that, my friends tell me, draws down over my pupils whenever I grow dreamy or bored.

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‘There. That’s it. You can mention my name if you like – but the great thing is to get hold of this woman. The hostess there.’

I am, I am bound to confess, afraid of hotels with hostesses.

‘I’d better write her name down too,’ he said. ‘Because she’s the one. She’ll do anything for you. You mustn’t forget her. Mrs Jackson Parkington.’

Over my eyes two little blinds of boredom had drawn themselves down. Suddenly, with explosive revelation, they snapped up again.

‘What’s she like?’ I said.

‘Terrific,’ he said. ‘Blonde. Long hair. Early forties, I should say, but it’s hard to tell. Figure of a young girl. Gorgeous dancer. Beautiful clothes. Easy with everybody. Able to talk to anybody, on any level, about anything, at any time.’

‘English?’

‘Sort of,’ he said. ‘Well, actually yes, I suppose. She was married to an American Air Force Colonel, they say, but it’s all over now. Usual story. Divorced. Came out of it pretty comfortably, I understand. Just does the hostess thing for fun.’

I tried to think of one or two more questions I might possibly ask about Bertha, but my friend swept me away on waves of greater eagerness, saying:

‘You go there. You’ll never regret it. That’s the way to make a hotel go – get a woman like that in. If there’s anything she can possibly do to make you happy she will. Somehow she’s got the knack of making everybody happy.’

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‘I’ll think about it,’ I said.

I did think about it; and for the first time there was, about Bertha, something I found not easy to forgive. It was not like Bertha to be pompous. Her body, her mind, her ways and her generosity were those of an enthralled innocence. I could not see her growing grand; I could not think of her, somehow, as rising too high in the world, half-way as it were to being a duchess, calling herself Mrs Jackson Parkington. But it was a little thing; and I was glad, really, she was still making people happy.

It was another five years, nearly six, before I saw my Italian mountains, deep-fissured and burnt by late August heat, the lakes below them oiled in blue-rose calm, the little cream clustered towns melting like squat candles into the water, the pink and pale yellow oleanders blooming below the vines.

Even this, after a few days, was too much for me. I found I could not sleep in the fierce, hot, mosquito nights of the lakeside and presently I moved to a village up a valley, half-way to the mountains.

In cooler exquisite mornings I walked about the rocks, stopped at little *caffès* for glasses of cold red wine and looked at the mountain flowers. In August there were not many flowers but sometimes on the paths, on the roads, and outside the *caffès* little girls would be selling bunches of pink wild cyclamen, like small rosy butterflies, full of fragile loveliness before they drooped in the heat of noon.

‘But what flowers are they? Could you tell me what flowers they are?’

At the corner of a mountain road I came, one morning,

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on a man and a woman buying bunches of the small pink cyclamen from a mute Italian child.

'But don't you know what flowers they are?' The man spoke in Italian, the woman in English. As I passed them the man gave the child a hundred lire note, but she stepped back, still mute, black eyes wide, like a dog frightened. 'Are they violets?' the woman said. 'Don't you know?'

In the white dust of the road the child started shuffling her bare feet. The woman opened her handbag, felt in it and started to offer the child another hundred lire note but suddenly the child, dropping her mouth with a cry, was away down the dust of the hillside.

'Sweet,' the woman said. 'What a pity.'

She closed her handbag. It was white, shaped like a little elegant drum. Her costume, of thinnest silk, was white too. Her shoes, earrings, and necklace were also white and she was carrying white gloves in her hands.

I turned from some four yards up the hillside.

'The flowers are wild cyclamen,' I said.

'Oh! really?' she said. 'Thank you. How clever of you to know.'

The man, who was dressed in a thin Italian suit of lavender with darker stripings, raised a white hat in my direction. Underneath it the head was handsome, distinguished, and nuttily bald.

'Cyclamen,' she said to him. 'Wild cyclamen.'

'Ah! yes,' he said. 'Ah! yes. That is so. That is the word I was trying to think of.' He spoke now in English. 'Thank you, sir.'

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In a suspense I found I could not break with words I stood trying to take in the immaculate picture, all white and gold, the legs perfectly exquisite, the bosom firm and uplifted, the eyes of intensely clear, hyacinth brightness, of Bertha framed at the age of fifty against the mountain-side. If from that distance she gave me any sign of recognition I did not detect it and presently, with a short wave of the hand, I turned and walked up the road.

Ten seconds later a figure came panting up behind me.

'Sir. Signor. It was most very kind of you to say the name of the flower. My wife is delighted. She thanks you very much.' He took off his hat again, revealing the sun-browned head, smiled in a distinguished way and shook hands. 'We are in the Hotel Savoia. By the bridge. If you have time will you take an *apéritif* with us, perhaps, this night?'

'It's very kind of you,' I said, 'but I'm leaving this afternoon.'

'Ah! too bad,' he said. 'Too bad. Too much pity. If you should change your mind my name is Count Umberto Pinelli. Please ask for me.'

He turned, lifted his hand and in a few seconds had joined her down the hillside. There, for a moment, she too lifted her hand.

'Thank you so much!' she called. 'Very, very kind of you. I do appreciate it. I never know about flowers.'

She smiled. Her hair shone with brilliance, with no trace of grey, against the fierce Italian sky. Her shoulders were as firm, sloping and impressive as the mountains. The cyclamen were pink and delicate in her hands.

And since I was in Italy and since I could think, as I

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stood there remembering a gaunt, yellow-eyed, prematurely ageing woman feverishly treadling at a sewing machine, of no reason to do otherwise, I smiled back to her and bowed in answer.

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘Enchanted.’

Lost Ball

'I OFTEN wonder if you couldn't do it by holding your breath for five minutes,' the girl said. 'I suppose that would be the most painless way.'

For some distance inland, in places unprotected by the sea-white shoulders of long sand-dunes, the shore had invaded the golf-course, giving wide stretches of it a sandy baldness from which hungry spears of grass sprang wirily, like greyish yellow hairs.

In other places the winds of old winters had thrown up pebbles, some grey, some brown, some like mauve oval cakes of soap, but most of them pure chalk white, water-smoothed to the perfection of eggs laid in casual clutches by long-vanished birds.

It was somewhere among the eggs that Phillips had lost his golf ball. He was always losing one there. They were so damn difficult to see and when it happened over and over again it was enough to drive you mad.

'They're so hellishly expensive too,' he said. 'That was why he had come back to search for the second time through the summer evening, after almost everyone else was either cheerfully gathered in the club-house or had long since gone home. 'I mean it makes the whole thing -'

'When did you lose it?'

'This morning. About half past eleven. Of course I couldn't stop then. Still playing. I suppose you weren't here about that time, were you?'

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‘I’ve been here all day.’

‘I mean I suppose you didn’t see or hear anything about that time? I wondered if you might perhaps have heard –’

‘Not a sound.’

Every Sunday morning he played eighteen holes with the same three fellows: Robinson, Chalmers, and Forbes. He supposed they had played like that for ten, perhaps twelve years, at any rate ever since the war, except when they played in competitions, when of course they were paired with other people and it wasn’t quite the same.

‘You couldn’t have hit it into the sea, could you?’ she said.

He looked at her sharply. She was still lying exactly where he had first stumbled across her and in the same position: curved and reclined, pale bare arms clasped at the back of her brown hair, her entire body crumpled into the white sandy lap of dune.

On her face, in which the eyes were remarkably dark and inert, as if she were half asleep as she contemplated the sky, he thought the expression of deep indifference amounted almost to contempt. Young people often looked like that and he supposed she was only nineteen or twenty.

He felt faintly annoyed too. Lately a lot of people had been using the golf course for any old thing: parking cars, picnics, courting in the sand dunes, exercising dogs, and that sort of caper. The committee had tried hard to stop it several times but it was damn difficult with the shore and the course so often merging into one.

Moreover it was a good fifty or sixty yards from the middle of the fairway to the dunes and then another forty or fifty to the sea.

LOST BALL

'Into the sea?' he said. 'Half a minute, I'm not that bad.

'I should have thought it would have been quite a feat to have hit it into the sea.'

Quite obviously she hadn't a clue about the game; which when you came to think of it was rather remarkable in these days, when so many women hit the ball as hard as a man.

'Well, I'm going to have another look,' he said. 'I'm going to find the damn thing if it kills me.'

Still contemplating the sky, still in that same half-sleepy crumpled position, she said:

'If it hasn't killed you in five minutes I'll help you look for it.'

He walked away without answering. Among the hollows of the dunes the evening air was still warm. Thick white sand sucked his shoes down and from the sea came one of those liquid summer breezes that you thought were so pleasant until they tired you.

As he walked about the shore scattered clutches of pebbles, like white eggs, continually bobbed up to deceive him, so much so that once or twice he was on the point of running to pick up his ball.

He always hated the idea of losing a ball. Quite apart from the expense it was a point of honour. Once before he had come back three evenings running to find a ball that other fellows would have given up as a bad job. He had had the luck to find three of someone else's too: which simply went to show that it didn't pay to give up.

After another twenty minutes of slogging about the dunes he suddenly felt quite tired. He was beginning to put on weight: not so much weight as either Chalmers or

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Forbes, both of whom had a belly, but more than Robinson, who was fifty-five, three years older than he was.

When he got back to the dune where the girl was he found her half sitting up, her knees bent. On one knee she was smoothing with slow strokes of her hand a square of silver paper. The brilliance of the smooth tin-foil in the evening sun made him realize for the first time the exact colour of her dress. He had simply thought it to be brown. Now he saw that it was really a blend of two colours: of dark rose-brown and purple shot together.

Under the dress the shape of her knees was graceful. The tips of her toes were buried in the sand. The way she smoothed the silver paper was merely mechanical. She was not really looking at it at all.

‘Found it?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’ll probably have to come back to-morrow. It’s enough to drive you to drink, or suicide, or both. I don’t know.’

‘As bad as that?’

‘Irritating. Maddening.’

She was still smoothing the silver paper and yet not looking at it. A breeze caught the paper and crackled it upward, like the flutter of a wing, and she pinned it down on her knee again with one finger, quite casually, as if bored.

‘Mind if I ask you something?’ she said.

‘No. What?’

‘How would you go about it?’

For a moment he was mystified and then realized, with abrupt surprise, what she was talking about.

‘Oh! here, wait a minute,’ he said, ‘it hasn’t got quite as far as that.’

LOST BALL

‘Oh! hasn’t it? I thought you said it had.’

‘Well, hardly. I mean it’s one of those things everybody says —’

‘But supposing it did?’

He felt a chill of distaste run over him. Abruptly he looked at the western horizon and thought that there might be still another hour in which to search for the ball before twilight came down.

It was then that she said:

‘I often wonder if you couldn’t do it by holding your breath for five minutes. I suppose that would be the most painless way?’

Got to find that damn ball somehow, he thought. He had been on the point of sitting down for five minutes’ rest but now he found himself prickling with impatience instead.

‘I suppose you wouldn’t help me look?’ he said. ‘There isn’t a lot more daylight —’

‘If you like. I don’t mind.’

As she got to her feet he saw that her dark brown hair, very ruffled, was starred everywhere with dry white sand. She seemed not to notice it. Nor did she even bother to shake it out.

Suddenly, as she climbed up to the grassy crest of the dune, he was captured by the grace of her bare legs, the skin a fine pure cream under the brown-purple skirt. With astonishment he found himself really looking at her for the first time. She was rather tall, shapely, and no longer crumpled.

She was what the fellows at the club would call nifty; she was what Freddy Robinson, in his heavy, waggish

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way, would refer to as a *petite morceau de tout droit*.

Suddenly from the top of the dune she turned, looking towards the sea. For some moments her eyes looked quite hollow and there was no answer for him when he said:

‘You’ll have to watch out for the pebbles. Especially the white ones. They’re the ones that trick you.’

He was never more than ten or a dozen yards from her as they walked about the dunes. The sun, falling as a coppery-orange disc into a rippled milk-blue sea, gradually stained sand and grass and pebbles with a flush of fire. The marine blue thorns of sea-thistle were touched with sepia rose. Her dress turned a sombre purple against her bare cream legs and arms.

‘Have to give it up,’ he called at last. ‘Afraid it’s no go. Just have to come back tomorrow, that’s all.’

Once again there was no answer. She was simply walking with unbroken dreamy indifference across shadowy, smouldering sand.

‘Can I give you a lift or something?’ he said. ‘My car’s at the club-house. No distance at all.’

Again there was no answer; but suddenly he saw her stoop, straighten slowly up again and then hold up her hand.

‘Is this it?’

He actually started running. When he reached her she was holding the ball, exactly like a precious egg, in the palm of her hand.

‘My God, it is,’ he said. ‘My God, what a bit of luck.’

He felt extraordinarily excited. He had a ridiculous impulse to shake her by the hand.

‘My God, what a bit of luck,’ he kept saying. ‘Nearly dark. What a bit of luck.’

LOST BALL

In the excitement of grasping the ball he was unaware that she had already started to walk away.

'Are you off?' he said. 'Where are you going? Which way?'

She walked along the beach without pausing or looking back.

'Just back to where I was sitting. I dropped my piece of silver paper.'

He found himself almost running after her.

'Saved me a shilling too,' he said. 'I can tell you that.'

'Oh?' she said. 'Is that all they cost?'

He laughed. 'Oh! Good God, no. Didn't mean that. I meant we have a sort of kitty – the four of us. I mean, the chaps I play with. Every time we lose a ball we put a bob in.'

'Why?'

'Sort of fine. Amazing how it adds up.'

'What do you do with it when it adds up?'

'Buy more balls.' He laughed again. 'That's where the fun starts.'

'Fun?'

She was walking more slowly now. The folds of her purplish skirt were touched with copper. The sea burned with small metallic waves.

'You see we have a draw. Sort of lottery. Lucky number. Chap who gets the lucky number gets the balls.'

'I don't get it.'

'Suppose it's the old thrill – the kick you get out of any gamble. Something for nothing.'

She started to look about her, as if not quite certain

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about the exact place where she had left her silver paper on the beach.

'You see what I mean, don't you?' he said. 'You might never lose a ball for a couple of months and then wham! you hit the jackpot. That's when it's fun – when you see the faces of the other chaps.'

'I see.'

'Of course it might be you next time.' He laughed again. 'But so far I've been damn lucky. Struck it three times out of five. Fred Chalmers is the one – never had it once. Worth anything to see his face – livid, I tell you. Livid isn't the word.'

He laughed yet again and suddenly she let out a quick startled cry.

'Oh! my silver paper's gone.'

He didn't bother to answer. A vivid picture of Fred Chalmers's furious face lit up the air between sea and beach with a heartening glow.

'The wind must have taken it,' she said. 'I'd had it all day.'

In the failing light she stood staring thoughtfully down at the hollow her body had made in the sand.

'It isn't so important, is it?' he said. The ball felt hard and secure as he pressed it in his hand and put it in his pocket. 'I'm afraid I must be going. What about you? Coming along?'

'No. I think I'll stay a little longer.'

'Getting dark.'

'It always does some time.'

She took a few light half-running steps down the beach, as if she had seen the silver paper. A fragment of dying

LOST BALL

light bounced from a breaking wave. A few spreading phosphorescent tongues of foam lapped the sand.

‘Sure you won’t change your mind and come and have a drink?’

‘No thanks. I’ll stay a bit longer. I want to find my piece of silver paper.’

‘Really? Why?’

She was walking away now, face towards the sunset but slightly downcast.

‘I just do. I’ll just cover the water-front a few more times. You know that song? *I Cover the Water-front?*’

He thought he heard her sigh; she might suddenly have been holding her breath.

‘Can’t say I do.’

‘Nice song. “I cover the water-front. I’m watching the sea. Oh! When will my love come back to me – ”’

She was already too far away for him to hear the rest of the song. Her figure was black against the last thin running bars of copper above the sea.

‘Afraid you won’t stand much chance of seeing anything now, will you?’ he called.

He got no answer. He looked briefly at her figure, the darkening sand and the lapping phosphorescent tongues of foam and then started to walk up the slope of the beach towards the dunes.

The evening wind was fresher there. The grey-yellow hairs of dune-grass were pressed close against smoothed ridges of sand. A leaf or two of sea-thistle rattled sharply.

Caught among hairs of grass, the square of silver paper rattled too.

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‘Wrong way,’ he started saying aloud. ‘Looking the wrong way!’

He was half-way down to the beach, waving the silver paper, before he realized suddenly what he was doing.

‘Here, I’ve got your piece of paper,’ he was already saying. ‘I’ve found it –’

A second later he stopped speaking and pulled up sharp, glancing round at the same time as if someone might possibly be listening.

Then suddenly he realized what an awful damn fool he was making of himself – absolute damn fool. He looked hastily along the shore in the gathering darkness to make quite sure that the girl had not heard him running back with that ridiculous piece of paper. Why the hell could it be all that important to her? What on earth could anyone possibly want with that?

It was time he stopped fooling around and got back to the club-house and talked to the chaps and bought himself a whisky, he thought – perhaps two.

He started up the slope towards the dunes again, screwing up the silver paper into a little ball as he went. At the ridge he turned for a second time and looked back.

The shore was quite empty. He threw down the silver ball among the pebbles that were so like clutches of eggs laid by long-vanished birds and didn’t even bother to watch where it fell.

Looking finally towards the last copper straws of sunset cloud, he started suddenly to congratulate himself. ‘Just as well not to chase your luck too far,’ he thought. ‘Might get caught up with something funny. Anyway, you got your ball back, old boy. Be satisfied.’

LOST BALL

He listened again for a sound of her voice or her footsteps coming back. But all he could hear was the sound of wind and tide rising and halting and falling in little bursts along the darkening shore.

It was exactly as if the sea sometimes held its breath and then broke into a little fragile, broken song.

Now Sleeps the Crimson Petal

CLARA CORBETT, who had dark brown deeply sunken eyes that did not move when she was spoken to and plain brown hair parted down the middle in a straight thin line, firmly believed that her life had been saved by an air warden's anti-gas cape on a black rainy night during the war.

In a single glittering, dusty moment a bomb had blown her through the window of a warden's post, hurling her to the wet street outside. The wind from the bomb had miraculously blown the cape about her face, masking and protecting her eyes. When she had picked herself up, unhurt, she suddenly knew that it might have been her shroud.

'Look slippy and get up to Mayfield Court. Six brace of partridges and two hares to pick up -'

'And on the way deliver them kidneys and the sirloin to Paxton Manor. Better call in sharp as you go out. They're having a lunch party.'

Now, every rainy day of her life, she still wore the old camouflaged cape as she drove the butcher's van, as if half fearing that some day, somewhere, another bomb would blow her through another window, helplessly and for ever. The crumpled patterns of green-and-yellow camouflage always made her look, in the raid, like a damp, baggy, meditating frog.

Every day of his life, her husband, Clem, wore his bowler hat in the butcher's shop, doffing it obsequiously

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

to special customers, revealing a bald, yellow suet-shining head. Clem had a narrow way of smiling and argued that war had killed the meat trade.

Almost everyone else in that rather remote hilly country, where big woodlands were broken by open stretches of chalk heathland covered with gorse and blackthorn and occasional yew trees, had given up delivering to outlying houses. It simply didn't pay. Only Clem Corbett, who doffed his hat caressingly to customers with one hand while leaving the thumb of his other on the shop scales a fraction of a second too long, thought it worth while any longer.

'One day them people'll all come back. The people with class. Mark my words. The real gentry. They're the people you got to keep in with. The pheasant-and-partridge class. The real gentry. Not the sausage-and-scragenders.'

Uncomplainingly, almost meekly, Clara drove out, every day, in the old delivery van with a basket or two in the back and an enamel tray with a few bloody, neatly-wrapped cuts of meat on it, into wooded, hilly countryside. Sometimes in winter, when the trees were thinned of leaves, the chimneys of empty houses, the mansions of the late gentry, rose starkly from behind deep thick beech-woods that were thrown like vast bearskins across the chalk. In summer the chalk flowered into a hill garden of wild yellow rock-rose, wild marjoram, and countless waving mauve scabious covered on hot afternoons with nervous darting butterflies.

She drove into this countryside, winter and summer, camouflaged always by the gas-cape on days of rain, without much change of expression. Her meek sunken eyes

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fixed themselves firmly on the winter woods, on the narrow lanes under primroses or drifts of snow, and on the chalk flowers of summer as if the seasons made no change in them at all. It was her job simply to deliver meat, to rap or ring at kitchen doors, to say good morning and thank you and then to depart in silence, camouflaged, in the van.

If she ever thought about the woods, about the blazing open chalkland in which wild strawberries sparkled, pure scarlet, in hot summers, or about the big desolate mansions standing empty among the beechwoods, she did not speak of it to a soul. If the mansions were one day to be opened up again, then they would, she supposed, be opened up. If people with money and class were to come back again, as Clem said they would, once more to order barons of beef and saddles of lamb and demand the choicest cuts of venison, then she supposed they would come back. That was all.

In due course, if such things happened, she supposed Clem would know how to deal with them. Clem was experienced; capable, and shrewd, a good butcher and a good business man. Clem knew how to deal with people of class. Clem, in the early days of business, had been used to supplying the finest of everything, as his father and grandfather had done before him, for house parties, shooting luncheons, ducal dinners, and regimental messes. The days of the gentry might, as Clem said, be under a temporary cloud. But finally, one day, class would surely triumph again and tradition would be back. The war might have half killed the meat trade, but it couldn't kill those people. They were there all the time, as Clem said, somewhere.

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They were the backbone, the real people, the gentry.

‘Didn’t I tell you?’ he said one day. ‘Just like I told you. Belvedere’s opening up. Somebody’s bought Belvedere.’

She knew about Belvedere. Belvedere was one of those houses, not large but long empty, whose chimneys rose starkly, like tombs, above the beechwoods of winter-time. For six years the army had carved its ashy, cindery name on Belvedere.

‘See, just like I told you,’ Clem said two days later, ‘the gentleman from Belvedere just phoned up. The right people are coming back. We got an order from Belvedere.’

By the time she drove up to Belvedere, later that morning, rain was falling heavily, sultrily warm, on the chalk flowers of the hillsides. She was wearing the old wartime cape, as she always did under rain, and in the van, on the enamel tray, at the back, lay portions of sweetbreads, tripe, and liver.

High on the hills, a house of yellow stucco frontage, with thin iron balconies about the windows and green iron canopies above them, faced the valley.

‘Ah, the lady with the victuals! The lady with the viands. The lady from Corbett, eh?’ A man of forty-five or fifty, in shirtsleeves, portly, wearing a blue-striped apron, his voice plummy and soft, answered her ring at the kitchen door.

‘Do come in. You are from Corbett, aren’t you?’

‘I’m Mrs Corbett.’

‘How nice. Come in, Mrs Corbett, come in. Don’t stand there. It’s loathsome and you’ll catch a death. Come in. Take off your cape. Have a cheese straw.’

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The rosy flesh of his face was smeared with flour dust. His fattish soft fingers were stuck about with shreds of dough.

'You arrived in the nick, Mrs Corbett. I was about to hurl these wretched things into the stove, but now you can pass judgement on them for me.'

With exuberance he suddenly put in front of her face a plate of fresh warm cheese straws.

'Taste and tell me, Mrs Corbett. Taste and tell.'

With shyness, more than usually meek, her deep brown eyes lowered, she took a cheese straw and started to bite on it.

'Tell me,' he said, 'if it's utterly loathsome.'

'It's very nice, sir.'

'Be absolutely frank, Mrs Corbett,' he said. 'Absolutely frank. If they're too revolting say so.'

'I think -'

'I tell you what, Mrs Corbett,' he said, 'they'll taste far nicer with a glass of sherry. That's it. We shall each have a glass of pale dry sherry and see how it marries with the cheese.'

Between the sherry and the cheese straws and his own conversation she found there was not much chance for her to speak. With bewilderment she watched him turn away, the cheese straws suddenly forgotten, to the kitchen table, a basin of flour, and a pastry board.

With surprising delicacy he pressed with his fingers at the edges of thin pastry lining a brown shallow dish. Beside it lay a pile of pink peeled mushrooms.

'This I know is going to be delicious,' he said. 'This I am sure about. I adore cooking. Don't you?'

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Speechlessly she watched him turn to the stove and begin to melt butter in a saucepan.

'*Crouûte aux champignons*,' he said. 'A kind of mushroom pie. There are some things one knows one does well. This I love to do. It's delicious – you know it, of course, don't you? Heavenly.'

'No, sir.'

'Oh, don't call me sir, Mrs Corbett. My name is Lafarge. Henry Lafarge.' He turned to fill up his glass with sherry, at the same time fixing her with greyish bulbous eyes. 'Aren't you terribly uncomfortable in that wretched mackintosh? Why don't you throw it off for a while?'

The voice, though not unkindly, shocked her a little. She had never thought of the cape as wretched. It was a very essential, useful, hard-wearing garment. It served its purpose very well, and with fresh bewilderment she pushed it back from her shoulders.

'Do you think I'm a fool?' he said. 'I mean about this house? All my friends say I'm a fool. Of course it's in a ghastly state, one knows, but I think I can do things with it. Do you agree? Do you think I'm a fool?'

She could not answer. She felt herself suddenly pre-occupied, painfully, with the old brown dress she was wearing under the gas-cape. With embarrassment she folded her hands across the front of it, unsuccessfully trying to conceal it from him.

To her relief he was, however, staring at the rain. 'I think it's letting up at last,' he said. 'In which case I shall be able to show you the outside before you go. You simply must see the outside, Mrs Corbett. It's a ravishing

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wilderness. Ravishing to the point of being sort of almost Strawberry Hill. You know?’

She did not know, and she stared again at her brown dress, frayed at the edges.

Presently the rain slackened and stopped and only the great beeches overshadowing the house were dripping. The sauce for the *croûte aux champignons* was almost ready, and Lafarge dipped a little finger into it and then thoughtfully licked it, staring at the same time at the dripping summer trees.

‘I’m going to paint most of it myself,’ he said. ‘It’s more fun, don’t you think? More creative. I don’t think we’re half creative enough, do you? Stupid to allow menials and lackeys to do all the nicest things for us, don’t you think?’

Pouring sauce over the mushrooms, he fixed on her an inquiring, engaging smile that did not need an answer.

‘Now, Mrs Corbett, the outside. You must see the outside.’

Automatically she began to draw on her cape.

‘I can’t think why you cling to that wretched cape, Mrs Corbett,’ he said. ‘The very day war was over I had a simply glorious ceremonial bonfire of all those things.’

In a cindery garden of old half-wild roses growing out of matted tussocks of grass and nettle, trailed over by thick white horns of convolvulus, he showed her the southern front of the house with its rusty canopies above the windows and its delicate iron balconies entwined with blackberry and briar.

‘Of course at the moment the plaster looks frightfully leprous,’ he said, ‘but it’ll be pink when I’ve done with it. The sort of pink you see in the Mediterranean. You know?’

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A Virginia creeper had enveloped with shining tendrilled greed the entire western wall of the house, descending from the roof in a dripping curtain of crimson-green.

‘The creeper is coming down this week,’ he said. ‘Ignore the creeper.’ He waved soft pastry-white hands in the air, clasping and unclasping them. ‘Imagine a rose there. A black one. An enormous deep red-black one. A hat rose. You know the sort?’

Again she realized he did not need an answer.

‘The flowers will glow,’ he said, ‘like big glasses of dark red wine on a pink tablecloth. Doesn’t that strike you as being absolute heaven on a summer’s day?’

Bemused, she stared at the tumbling skeins of creeper, at the rising regiments of sow-thistle, more than ever uncertain what to say. She began hastily to form a few words about it being time for her to go when he said: ‘There was something else I had to say to you, Mrs Corbett, and now I can’t think what it is. Terribly important too. Momentously important.’

A burst of sunshine falling suddenly on the wet wilderness, the rusting canopies and Clara’s frog-like cape seemed abruptly to enlighten him. ‘Ah – hearts,’ he said. ‘That was it.’

‘Hearts?’

‘What’s today? Tuesday. Thursday,’ he said, ‘I want you to bring me one of your nicest hearts.’

‘One of my hearts?’

He laughed, again not unkindly. ‘Bullock’s,’ he said.

‘Oh! Yes, I see.’

‘Did you know,’ he said, ‘that hearts taste like goose?’

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Just 'like goose-flesh?' He stopped, laughed again, and actually touched her arm. 'No, no. That's wrong. Too rich. One can't say that. One can't say heart's like goose-flesh. Can one?'

A stir of wind shook the beech boughs, bringing a spray of rain sliding down the long shafts of sunlight.

'I serve them with cranberry sauce,' he said. 'With fresh peas and fresh new potatoes I defy anyone to tell the difference.'

They were back now at the kitchen door, where she had left her husband's basket on the step.

'We need more imagination, that's all,' he said. 'The despised heart is absolutely royal, I assure you, if you treat it properly -'

'I think I really must go now, Mr Lafarge,' she said, 'or I'll never get done. Do you want the heart early?'

'No,' he said, 'afternoon will do. It's for a little evening supper party. Just a friend and I. Lots of parties, that's what I shall have. Lots of parties, little ones, piggy ones in the kitchen, first. Then one big one, an enormous house-warmer, a cracker, when the house is ready.'

She picked up her basket, automatically drawing the cape round her shoulders and started to say, 'All right, sir. I'll be up in the afternoon -'

'Most kind of you, Mrs Corbett,' he said. 'Good-bye. So kind. But no "sir" - we're already friends. Just Lafarge.'

'Good-bye, Mr Lafarge,' she said.

She was half-way back to the van when he called, 'Oh, Mrs Corbett! If you get no answer at the door you'll probably find me decorating.' He waved soft, pastry-

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white hands in the direction of the creeper, the canopies, and the rusting balconies. 'You know - up there.'

When she came back to the house late on Thursday afternoon, not wearing her cape, the air was thick and sultry. All along the stark white fringes of chalk, under the beechwoods, yellow rock-roses flared in the sun. Across the valley hung a few high bland white clouds, delicate and far away.

'The creeper came down with a thousand empty birds' nests,' Lafarge called from a balcony. 'A glorious mess.'

Dressed in dark blue slacks, with yellow open shirt, blue silk muffler, and white panama, he waved towards her a pink-tipped whitewash brush. Behind him the wall, bare of creeper, was drying a thin blotting-paper pink in the sun.

'I put the heart in the kitchen,' she said.

Ignoring this, he made no remark about her cape, either. 'The stucco turned out to be in remarkably good condition,' he said. 'Tell me about the paint. You're the first to see it. Too dark?'

'I think it's very nice.'

'Be absolutely frank,' he said. 'Be as absolutely frank and critical as you like, Mrs Corbett. Tell me exactly how it strikes you. Isn't it too dark?'

'Perhaps it is a shade too dark.'

'On the other hand one has to picture the rose against it,' he said. 'Do you know anyone who grows that wonderful black-red rose?'

She stood staring up at him. 'I don't think I do.'

'That's a pity,' he said, 'because if we had the rose one

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could judge the effect – However, I'm going to get some tea. Would you care for tea?’

In the kitchen he made tea with slow, punctilious ritual care.

‘The Chinese way,’ he said. ‘First a very little water. Then a minute’s wait. Then more water. Then another wait. And so on. Six minutes in all. The secret lies in the waits and the little drops of water. Try one of these. It’s a sort of sour-milk tart I invented.’

She sipped tea, munched pastry, and stared at the raw heart she had left in a dish on the kitchen table.

‘Awfully kind of you to stop and talk to me, Mrs Corbett,’ he said. ‘You’re the first living soul I’ve spoken to since you were here on Tuesday.’

Then, for the first time, she asked a question that had troubled her.

‘Do you live here all alone?’ she said.

‘Absolutely, but when the house is done I shall have masses of parties. Masses of friends.’

‘It’s rather a big house for one person.’

‘Come and see the rooms,’ he said. ‘Some of the rooms I had done before I moved in. My bedroom for instance. Come upstairs.’

Upstairs a room in pigeon grey, with a deep green carpet and an open french window under a canopy, faced across the valley.

He stepped out on the balcony, spreading enthusiastic hands.

‘Here I’m going to have big plants. Big plushy ones. Petunias. Blowzy ones. Begonias, fuchsias, and that sort of thing. Opulence everywhere.’

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He turned and looked at her. 'It's a pity we haven't got that big black rose.'

'I used to wear a hat with a rose like that on it,' she said, 'but I never wear it now.'

'How nice,' he said, and came back into the room, where suddenly, for the second time, she felt the intolerable dreariness of her brown woollen dress.

Nervously she put her hands in front of it again and said:

'I think I ought to be going now, Mr Lafarge. Was there something for the week-end?'

'I haven't planned,' he said. 'I'll have to telephone.'

He stood for a moment in the window, looking straight at her with an expression of sharp, arrested amazement.

'Mrs Corbett,' he said, 'I saw the most extraordinary effect just now. It was when I was on the ladder and we were talking about the rose. You were standing there looking up at me and your eyes were so dark that it looked as if you hadn't got any. They're the darkest eyes I've ever seen. Didn't anyone ever tell you so?'

No one, as she remembered it, had ever told her so.

The following Saturday morning she arrived at the house with oxtail and kidneys. 'I shall have the kidneys with *sauce madère*,' he said. 'And perhaps even *flambés*.'

He was kneading a batch of small brown loaves on the kitchen table, peppering them with poppy seeds, and he looked up from them to see her holding a brown-paper bag.

'It's only the rose off my hat,' she said. 'I thought you might like to try -'

'Darling Mrs Corbett,' he said. 'You dear creature.'

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No one, as she remembered it, had ever called her darling before. Nor could she ever remember being, for anyone, at any time, a dear creature.

Some minutes later she was standing on the balcony outside his bedroom window, pressing the dark red rose from her hat against the fresh pink wall. He stood in the cindery wilderness below, making lively, rapturous gestures.

‘Delicious, my dear. Heavenly. You must see it. You simply must come down!’

She went down, leaving the rose on the balcony. A few seconds later he was standing in her place while she stood in the garden below, staring up at the effect of her dark red rose against the wall.

‘What do you feel?’ he called.

‘It seems real,’ she said. ‘It seems to have come alive.’

‘Ah! but imagine it in another summer,’ he said. ‘When it will be real. When there’ll be lots of them, scores of them, blooming here.’

With extravagant hands he tossed the rose down to her from the balcony. Instinctively she lifted her own hands, trying to catch it. It fell instead into a forest of sow-thistle.

He laughed, again not unkindly, and called, ‘I’m so grateful, darling Mrs Corbett. I really can’t tell you how grateful I am. You’ve been so thoughtful. You’ve got such taste.’

With downcast eyes she picked the rose out of the mass of sow-thistle, not knowing what to say.

Through a tender August, full of soft light that seemed to reflect back from dry chalky fields of oats and wheat and barley just below the hill, the derelict house grew

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prettily, all pink at first among the beeches. By September, Lafarge had begun work on the balconies, painting them a delicate seagull grey. Soon the canopies were grey, too, hanging like half sea-shells above the windows. The doors and windows became grey also, giving an effect of delicate lightness to the house against the background of arching massive boughs.

She watched these transformations almost from day to day as she delivered to Lafarge kidneys, tripe, liver, sweetbreads, calves' heads, calves' feet, and the hearts that he claimed were just like goose-flesh.

'Offal,' he was repeatedly fond of telling her, 'is far too underrated. People are altogether too superior about offal. The eternal joint is the curse. What could be more delicious than sweetbreads? Or calf's head? Or even chitterlings? There is a German recipe for chitterlings, Mrs Corbett, that could make you think you were eating I don't know what – some celestial, melting manna. You must bring me chitterlings one day soon, Mrs Corbett dear.'

'I have actually found the rose too,' he said one day with excitement. 'I have actually ordered it from a catalogue. It's called Chateau Clos de Vougeot and it's just like the rose on your hat. It's like a deep dark red burgundy.'

All this time, now that the weather had settled into the rainless calm of late summer, she did not need to wear her cape. At the same time she did not think of discarding it. She thought only with uneasiness of the brown frayed dress and presently replaced it with another, dark blue, that she had worn as second-best for many years.

By October, when the entire outside of the house had

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become transformed, she began to feel, in a way, that she was part of it. She had seen the curtains of creeper, with their thousand birds' nests, give way to clean pink stucco. The canopies had grown from bowls of rusty green tin to delicate half seashells and the balconies from mere paintless coops to pretty cages of seagull grey. As with the fields, the beechwoods, the yellow rock-roses running across the chalk, and the changing seasons she had hardly any way of expressing what she felt about these things. She could simply say, 'Yes, Mr Lafarge, I think it's lovely. It's very nice, Mr Lafarge. It's sort of come alive.'

'Largely because of you, dear,' he would say. 'You've inspired the thing. You've fed me with your delicious viands. You've helped. You've given opinions. You brought the rose for the wall. You've got such marvellous instinctive taste, Mrs Corbett dear.'

Sometimes too he would refer again to her eyes, that were so dark and looked so straight ahead and hardly moved when spoken to. 'It's those wonderful eyes of yours, Mrs Corbett,' he would say. 'I think you have a simply marvellous eye.'

By November the weather had broken up. In the shortening rainy days the beeches began to shed continuous golden-copper showers of leaves. Electric light had now been wired to the outer walls of the house, with concealed lamps beneath the balconies and windows.

She did not see these lights switched on until a darkening afternoon in mid November, when Lafarge greeted her with an intense extravagance of excitement.

'Mrs Corbett, my dear, I've had an absolute storm of inspiration. I'm going to have the house-warmer next Sat-

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urday. All my friends are coming and you and I have to talk of hearts and livers and delicious things of that sort and so on and so on. But that isn't really the point. Come outside, Mrs Corbett dear, come outside.'

In the garden, under the dark baring trees, he switched on the lights. 'There darling!'

Sensationally a burst of electric light gave to the pink walls and the feather-grey canopies, doors, windows, balconies, a new, uplifting sense of transformation. She felt herself catch her breath.

The house seemed to float for a moment against half-naked trees, in the darkening afternoon, and he said in that rapturously plummy voice of his, 'But that isn't all, dear, that isn't all. You see, the rose has arrived. It came this morning. And suddenly I had this wild surmise, this wonderful on-a-peak-in-Darien sort of thing. Can you guess?'

She could not guess.

'I'm going to plant it,' he said, 'at the party.'

'Oh yes that will be nice,' she said.

'But that's not all, dear, that's not all,' he said. 'More yet. The true, the blushful has still to come. Can't you guess?'

Once again she could not guess.

'I want you to bring that rose of yours to the party,' he said. 'We'll fix it to the tree. And then in the electric light, against the pink walls -'

She felt herself catch her breath again, almost frightened.

'Me?' she said. 'At the party?'

'Well, of course, darling. Of course.'

'Mr Lafarge, I couldn't come to your party -'

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'My dear,' he said, 'if you don't come to my party, I shall be for ever mortally, dismally, utterly offended.'

She felt herself begin to tremble. 'But I couldn't, Mr Lafarge, not with all your friends - '

'Darling Mrs Corbett. You are my friend. There's no argument about it. You'll come. You'll bring the rose. We'll fix it to the tree and it will be heaven. All my friends will be here. You'll love my friends.'

She did not protest or even answer. In brilliant electric light she stared with her dark diffident eyes at the pink walls of the house and felt as if she were under an arc-light, about to undergo an operation, naked, transfixed, helpless.

It was raining when she drove up to the house on Saturday evening, wearing her cape and carrying the rose in a paper bag. But by the time she reached the hills she was able to stop the windscreen-wipers on the van and presently the sky was pricked with stars.

There were so many cars outside the house that she stood for some time outside, afraid to go in. During this time she was so nervous and preoccupied that she forgot that she was still wearing the cape. She remembered it only at the last moment, and then took it off and rolled it up and put it in the van.

Standing in the kitchen she could only think that the house was a cage, now full of gibbering monkeys. Bewildered, she stood staring at trays of glasses, rows of bottles, many dishes of decorated morsels of lobster, prawns, olives, nuts, and sausages.

As she stood there a woman came in with a brassy

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voice, a long yellow cigarette holder, and a low neckline from which melon-like breasts protruded white and hard, and took a drink from a tray, swallowing it quickly before taking the entire tray back with her.

‘Just float in, dear. It’s like a mill-race in there. You just go with the damn stream.’

Cautiously Mrs Corbett stood by the door of the drawing-room, holding the rose in its paper bag and staring at the gibbering, munching, sipping faces swimming before her in smoky air.

It was twenty minutes before Lafarge, returning to the kitchen for plates of food, accidentally found her standing there, transfixed with deep immobile eyes.

‘But darling Mrs Corbett! Where have you been? I’ve been telling everyone about you and you were not here. I want you to meet everyone. They’ve all heard about you. Everyone!’

She found herself borne away among strange faces, mute and groping.

‘Angela darling, I want you to meet Mrs Corbett. The most wonderful person. The dearest sweetie. I call her my heart specialist.’

A chestless girl with tow-coloured hair, cut low over her forehead to a fringe, as with a basin, stared at her with large, hollow, unhealthy eyes. ‘Is it true you’re a heart specialist? Where do you practise?’

Before Clara could answer a man with an orange tie, a black shirt, and a stiff carrot beard came over and said, ‘Good lord, what a mob. Where does Henry get them from? Let’s whip off to the local. That woman Forbes is drooling as usual into every ear.’

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Excuseless, the girl with hollow eyes followed him away. Lafarge too had disappeared.

'Haven't I seen you somewhere before? Haven't we met? I rather fancied we had.' A young man with prematurely receding, downy yellow hair and uncertain reddish eyes, looking like a stoat, sucked at a glass, smoked a cigarette, and held her in a quivering, fragile stare.

'Known Henry long? Doesn't change much, does he? How's the thing getting on? The opus, I mean. The great work. He'll never finish it, of course. Henry's sort never do.'

It was some time before she realized what was wrong with the fragile uncertain eyes. The young man spilt the contents of his glass over his hands, his coat, and his thin, yellow snake of a tie. He moved away with abrupt unsteadiness and she heard a crash of glass against a chair. It passed unnoticed, as if a pin had dropped.

Presently she was overwhelmed by hoglike snorts of laughter, followed by giggling, and someone said, 'What's all this about a rose?'

'God knows.'

'Some gag of Henry's.'

A large man in tweeds of rope-like thickness stood with feet apart, laughing his hoglike laugh. Occasionally he steadied himself as he drank and now and then thrust his free hand under a heavy shirt of black-and-yellow check, scratching the hairs on his chest.

Drinking swiftly, he started to whisper, 'What's all this about Henry and the grocer's wife? They say she's up here every hour of the day.'

'Good lord, Henry and what wife?'

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‘Grocer’s I thought – I don’t know. You mean you haven’t heard?’

‘Good lord, no. Can’t be. Henry and girls?’

‘No? You don’t think so?’

‘Can’t believe it. Not Henry. He’d run from a female fly.’

‘All females are fly.’

Again, at this remark, there were heavy, engulfing guffaws of laughter.

‘Possible, I suppose, possible. One way of getting the custom.’

She stood in a maze, only half hearing, only half awake. Splinters of conversation went crackling past her bewildered face like scraps of flying glass.

‘Anybody know where the polly is? Get me a drink while I’m gone, dear. Gin. Not sherry. The sherry’s filthy.’

‘Probably bought from the grocer.’

Leaning against the mantelpiece, a long arm extended, ash dropping greyly and seedily down her breast, the lady with the yellow cigarette holder was heard, with a delicate hiss, to accuse someone of bitchiness.

‘But then we’re all bitches, aren’t we,’ she said, ‘more or less? But she especially.’

‘Did she ever invite you? She gets you to make up a number for dinner and when you get there a chap appears on the doorstep and says they don’t need you any more. Yes, actually!’

‘She’s a swab. Well, poor Alex, he knows it now.’

‘That’s the trouble, of course – when you do know, it’s always too bloody late to matter.’

Everywhere the air seemed to smoke with continuous white explosions. Soon Clara started to move away and

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found herself facing a flushed eager Lafarge, who in turn was pushing past a heavy woman in black trousers, with the jowls of a bloodhound and bright blonde hair neatly brushed back and oiled, like a man.

‘There you are, Mrs Corbett. You’ve no drink. Nothing to eat. You haven’t met anybody.’

A man was edging past her and Lafarge seized him by the arm.

‘Siegfried. Mrs Corbett, this is my friend Siegfried Pascoe. Siegfried, dear fellow, hold her hand. Befriend her while I get her a drink. It’s our dear Mrs Corbett, Siegfried, of heart fame.’ He squeezed Mrs Corbett’s arm laughing. ‘His mother called him Siegfried because she had a Wagner complex,’ he said. ‘Don’t move!’

An object like an unfledged bird, warm and boneless, slid into her hand. Limply it slid out again and she looked up to see a plump creaseless moon of a face, babyish, almost pure white under carefully curled brown hair, staring down at her with pettish, struggling timidity. A moment later, in a void, she heard the Pascoe voice attempting to frame its syllables like a fussy machine misfiring, the lips loose and puffy.

‘What do you f-f-f-feel about Eliot?’ it said.

She could not answer, she could think of no one she knew by the name of Eliot.

To her relief Lafarge came back, bearing a glass of sherry and a plate on which were delicate slices of meat rolled up and filled with wine-red jelly. ‘This,’ he told her, ‘is the heart. Yes, your heart, Mrs Corbett. The common old heart. Taste it, dear. Take the fork. Taste it and see if it isn’t absolute manna. I’ll hold the sherry.’

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She ate the cold heart. Cranberry sauce squeezed itself from the rolls of meat and ran down her chin and just in time she caught it with a fork.

The heart, she thought, tasted not at all unlike heart and in confusion she heard Lafarge inquire, 'Delicious?'

'Very nice.'

'Splendid. So glad - '

With a curious unapologetic burst of indifference he turned on his heel and walked away. Five seconds later he was back again, saying, 'Siegfried, dear boy, we shall do the rose in five minutes. Could you muster the spade? It's stopped raining. We'll fling the doors open, switch on the lights, and make a dramatic thing of it. Everybody will pour forth - '

He disappeared a second time into the mass of gibbering faces, taking with him her glass of sherry, and when she turned her eyes she saw that Siegfried Pascoe too had gone.

'What on earth has possessed Henry? They say she's the butcher's wife. Not grocer's after all.'

'Oh, it's a gag, dear. You know how they hot things up. It's a gag.'

She set her plate at last on a table and began to pick her way through the crush of drinkers, seeking the kitchen. To her great relief there was no one there. Suddenly tired, hopelessly bewildered and sick, she sat down on a chair, facing a wreckage of half-chewed vol-au-vents, canapés, salted biscuits, and cold eyes of decorated egg. The noise from the big drawing-room increased like the hoarse and nervous clamour rising from people

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who, trapped, lost and unable to find their way, were fighting madly to be free.

Out of it all leapt a sudden collective gasp, as if gates had been burst open and the trapped, lost ones could now mercifully find their way. In reality it was a gasp of surprise as Lafarge switched on the outside lights, and she heard it presently followed by a rush of feet as people shuffled outwards into the rainless garden air.

Not moving, she sat alone at the kitchen table, clutching the rose in the paper bag. From the garden she heard laughter bursting in excited taunting waves. A wag shouted in a loud voice. 'Forward the grave-diggers! On with the spade-work!' and there were fresh claps of cater-wauling laughter.

From it all sprang the sudden petulant voice of Lafarge, like a child crying for a toy. 'The rose! Oh, my dear, the rose! Where is the rose? We can't do it without the rose! Where is the rose? We can't do it without the rose.'

Automatically she got up from the table. Even before she heard Lafarge's voice, nearer now, calling her name, she was already walking across the emptied drawing-room, towards the open french windows, with the paper bag.

'Mrs Corbett! Mrs Corbett! Oh, there you are, dear. Where did you get to? What a relief – and oh, you poppet, you've got the rose.'

She was hardly aware, as she stepped into the blinding white light of electric lamps placed about the bright pink walls, that he was saying, 'Oh, but Mrs Corbett, you must. After all, it's your rose, dear. I insist. It's all part of the thing. It's the nicest part of the thing –'

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Vaguely she became aware that the rose tree, spreading five fanlike branches, was already in its place by the wall.

‘Just tie it on, dear. Here’s the ribbon. I managed to get exactly the right-coloured ribbon.’

From behind her, as she stood under the naked light, tying the rose to the tree, she was assailed by voices in chattering boisterous acclamation. A few people actually clapped their hands and there were sudden trumpeted bursts of laughter as the wag who had shouted of grave-diggers suddenly shouted again, ‘Damn it all, Henry, give her a kiss. Kiss the lady! Be fair.’

‘Kiss her!’ everyone started shouting. ‘Kiss her. Kiss! Kiss, Henry! Kiss, kiss!’

‘*Pour encourager les autres!*’ the wag shouted. ‘Free demonstration.’

After a sudden burst of harsh, jovial catcalls she turned her face away, again feeling utterly naked and transfixed under the stark white lights. A second later she felt Lafarge’s lips brush clumsily, plummily across her own.

Everyone responded to this with loud bursts of cheers. ‘Ceremony over!’ Lafarge called out. He staggered uncertainly, beckoning his guests housewards. ‘Everybody back to the flesh-pots. Back to the grain and grape.’

‘Henry’s tight,’ somebody said. ‘What fun. Great, the kissing. Going to be a good party.’

She stood for some time alone in the garden, holding the empty paper bag. In an unexpected moment the lights on the pink walls were extinguished, leaving only the light from windows shining across the grass outside. She stood for a few moments longer and then groped to the wall, untied the rose, and put it back in the paper bag.

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Driving away down the hillside, she stopped the van at last and drew it into a gateway simply because she could think of no other way of calming the trembling in her hands. She stood for a long time clutching the side of the van. In confusion she thought of the rose on the wall, of hearts that were like gooseflesh, and of how, as Clem said, the gentry would come back. Then she took her cape and the paper bag with its rose out of the van.

When she had dropped the paper bag and the rose into the ditch she slowly pulled on the old cape and started to cry. As she cried she drew the cape over her head, as if afraid that someone would see her crying there, and then buried her face in it, as into a shroud.

The Place where Shady Lay

ON the fat black stove sat nearly a dozen loaves, each brown and new and warm and all shaped, with one exception, like hay stacks. The exception was a very little one that sometimes looked rather like a mouse and sometimes rather like a pincushion and sometimes rather like a squatting toad staring across the darkening kitchen with two bright currant-black eyes.

He was very proud of that littlest one. He had made it himself. Soon he would pick the currants out and then eat the still warm bread with a piece of new red cheese.

'Boy,' Uncle Joe said. 'Read us some o' the police court bits.'

'Police court bits,' Aunt Nancy said. 'Police court bits. Police court bits.'

Aunt Nancy was all red and shining as a radish from bending over the stove too much. The kitchen was all blue with pipe smoke and she was at war with it with a flapping towel.

'I wonder how either one o' you can find time for police court bits of a Friday,' she said. 'The week's gone a'ready. I know I never got no time.'

Aunt Nancy never had time. The baking was hardly done and there were still six or more collars to iron and beeswax and still the violets to bundle and the oranges to sort from their papers.

'And take your fingers off that bread! It's too hot yet. You'll dream. You'll get nightmares.'

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Uncle Joe was a placid, tender man. He had a big thistle-grey moustache. He was smoking a pipe and drinking tea out of a big brown moustache cup, with his elbows on the table. His head was white with curly hair that shone like fresh soapsuds. His spectacles were steel rimmed and tied round the back of his head with waxy string.

‘Ain’t you going to read to me, boy?’

‘I’m trying to find where the police court bits are.’

‘Generally on the back page, boy. Back page. Look on the back page.’

Uncle Joe had a flat green cart and a white clattering little pony. On Saturdays he drove the cart about the streets. A pair of big brass scales jangled up and down among skips of potatoes and carrots, cabbages and parsnips, rhubarb and onions. There was a scent of oranges and violets in the air and, also in the spring, of daffodils.

‘Them oranges are a bad sample.’ Aunt Nancy was bees-waxing collars now. The iron sizzled fiercely when she spat on it. The collars shone like proud marble. ‘Half on ’em are ’tacked afore we start. If we see more’n a few ’epence profit we’ll be lucky.’

‘Found it yet, boy?’

‘Is it where it says Petty Sessions?’

‘That’s it, boy. That’s it. You got it now.’

Uncle Joe blew contented smoke. He found it increasingly hard to read in the twilight and Aunt Nancy was always slow, even obstinate, about lighting the lamps. No sense in wasting light, she said. If you couldn’t see you could always feel.

‘Elizabeth Emma Brown, 42, housewife, of 12 Pond Cottages, Little Harlow, was charged with stealing two

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quartern loaves, the property of Charles Mayhew, and further charged that on or about – ’

‘And put half on ’em in the swill-tub I’ll bet,’ Aunt Nancy said. ‘I see three half loaves in the swill-tub only yesterday. Enough bread to keep a family.’

‘What’d she get?’ Uncle Joe said.

‘If they had to bake it, like me, they’d think twice about wasting it. Nicking bread that’s a fine thing.’

‘It says fined ten shillings or in default seven days.’

‘They’ll be lettin’ ’em off scot free soon,’ Aunt Nancy said. ‘It’s enough to make your blood rise.’

‘Lot o’ cases this week, boy?’

Uncle Joe, puffing smoke, smacked his lips and juicily sucked at his moustache. He loved a lot of cases. The boy loved it too. A lot of cases meant he could stay up long after the lamps were lighted. He could help to sort the oranges and make up bunches of violets surrounded with fresh collarettes of leaves. Strange blue eyes of mould shone from the rotting oranges under the golden lamp-light and curious winey odours filled the night air.

‘Charged with indecently assaulting a girl of fifteen, George Henry Parker, 42, said to be –’

‘Read us the next bit, boy, read us the next bit.’

Aunt Nancy attacked with a powerful poker the frontal bars of the stove, making fire leap out. The black tip of the poker reeked with smoke and she said:

‘They want this down their gullets, some on ’em. That’d cool ’em down. Well, I’m going to start them oranges, if nobody else ain’t.’

‘Read us a bit more, boy. Read us a bit more.’

It was getting harder and harder to read in the twilight.

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A dark April wind clattered against the leaves of a laurel tree in the garden outside and suddenly a cold spate of rain, almost hail, beat on the kitchen window.

‘Charles Albert Baxter, of no fixed abode –’

‘Who was that again, boy? Read that bit again.’

Uncle Joe sat with mouth open, pipe expectantly poised aloft, face glowing in the stirred light of the stove. A moment later Aunt Nancy started noisily dragging a crate of oranges into the kitchen from outside the door, at the same time letting in even sharper sounds of April wind and rain. A bang of the door and a ripping of orange-box wood twice drowned all words, so that Uncle Joe actually peered over the paper himself and said:

‘Baxter? No fixed abode? Is that what it says?’

‘That’s it. That’s what it says. Charles Albert –’

A look of great marvelling came over the face of Uncle Joe. An illumination far brighter than the mere reflection of firelight gave it a transcendental, beaming glow. A long silence wrapped him away for several minutes in reflective mystery and on the stove the little loaf that was sometimes like a mouse, at others like a pincushion but most of all a squatting toad, seemed to be watching, waiting and listening.

‘That’s Shady all right,’ Uncle Joe said. The sudden rustle of the first orange papers was like the impatient striking of a match. ‘That’s old Shady. What’s he back for?’

‘Shady Baxter?’ Aunt Nancy said. ‘Not him?’ She stopped putting oranges into a big brown skip basket and sat merely twisting an orange paper into a spill with her fingers. ‘Not Shady?’

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‘That’s Shady,’ Uncle Joe said and drew sharp moist air through his moustache in an uncanny whistle. ‘Old Shady – that’s old Shady boy.’

‘The last time I saw him,’ Aunt Nancy said and now her voice had stopped sounding like hissing steam and was low and quiet, hardly more than a whisper, ‘was that day they took him away. I seen him handcuffed on the train.’

‘He was a big handsome chap,’ Uncle Joe said, ‘more’n six foot tall. Hair black as a rook. Bin a-soldiering in India some time and when he got back he’d got one o’ them big curly black moustaches. Like a pair o’ bull’s horns.’

It was already past midday. The little cart was clattering about the outskirts of the town. The last of the violets, in purple water-sprinkled bunches, had long since been sold. A dry April wind was blowing dustily about the street, swaying unopened buds of lilac trees in gardens and whipping into the pony’s snowy mane.

‘Could run like a hare. Like lightning. Once he run from here to Caxton Gibbet in a mite over one hour.’

‘How far is Caxton Gibbet?’

‘Twenty miles or more. Might be twenty-five. I never bin there. I only heerd talk of it.’

The wind was behind them now. It seemed to be driving pony and cart along. It blew into the pony’s tail, so that it fanned out sometimes, peacock-wise.

‘A big man with his fists too. A big fighter. Champion o’ this county. He won a belt once. They had it hanging up for weeks in The George and Crown. In a glass case. All gold.’

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

The pony, scenting home, seemed to be running away with itself. Uncle Joe pulled on the reins. The pony fell into a sort of walking trot and in the cart the brass scale-pan fell over.

‘Are we going home now? I’m hungry.’

‘If you’re hungry chew on this apple. It’s got a scab or two on it but that won’t poison you.’

‘Real gold?’

The apple was a sweet, russety one. It had a dry cold flavour.

‘Real gold. He had his man like dead mutton from the start. They fought it out for twenty rounds. You should ha’ seen his muscles. You know the big walnut tree? His arms were just like that.’

Uncle Joe pulled on the reins again. The pony fell into a walk and Uncle Joe started to light his pipe, blowing strong blue smoke clouds.

‘Aren’t we going home?’

‘If you ain’t in a tearaway hurry,’ Uncle Joe said, ‘I was going to show you summat.’

‘About Shady?’

‘Well it ain’t jistly like it used to be, but – ’

Uncle Joe pulled on the left rein. The pony reared a fraction, tossing its head, and went resentfully past a row of cottages, a duck pond, and a field of sheep into a lane of budding hedgerows where speckled thrushes flew.

‘You see that there rick-yard?’

The rick-yard was hard by a little spinney, a triangular one, of oak and hazel. There were no leaves on the oaks yet. Four or five straw stacks stood about the yard and the wind blew into them with swishing sea-sounds. It blew

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too at the branches of hazel catkins, already dying and dusty, the colour of old straw.

'This,' Uncle Joe said, 'is where they caught up with him.'

Beyond the stacks was a low cow-hovel, brick-walled, with a roof of faggots.

'He was in the hovel. He was sort of half-layin', half-hangin' up in the roof, so they said. Bin there for days. Like a bat – you know.'

'What had he done? Why was he there?'

The pony was at a standstill now: it was puffing a little from running.

'Done a murder.' Uncle Joe took his pipe from his mouth and looked at the stem. A piece of string was tied round the end of the stem. It gave his front teeth something extra to bite on. 'Well, fust they said it was murder.'

'He killed somebody? A man?'

'You got to remember,' Uncle Joe said, 'that he was a very proud feller, Shady. Proud as a turkey cock. You should ha' seen him walking up the street, dressed up straight as a ram rod, them big shoulders back. He had a wonderful head of hair too. You know what a bull looks like? It was like that – all massed and curly.'

'The man – who was he? Did he kill with a gun?'

'No,' Uncle Joe said. 'Fightin'. A man named Willis, Archie Willis. He said to Shady he was finished, no good no more, said he was a wash-out. Shady made no more to do but offered him out and they started fightin'. In the finish Shady picked him up and throwed him up again a wall. It broke his skull open. What would you have done, boy?'

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‘Why is he here now? In the police court?’

The pony was proving more than ever restless. It chipped with an impatient front hoof at the road.

‘Perhaps he’s been sleepin’ rough. Very likely he ain’t got the price of a bit o’ bread or a night’s doss on him. They can pull you for that.’

‘Couldn’t he ask somebody for a piece of bread? Aunt Nancy says there’s bread in the swill-tubs.’

Uncle Joe, pulling on a rein, started to turn the pony round in the road, its hooves harsh on the dry metal.

‘You never knowed Shady, boy. Shady’d be too proud to ask a thing like that. He was a terrible proud man, Shady. I’ll be damned if he hadn’t got summat to be proud about an’ all. You know what? After he won that belt they’d have crowned him king if he’d let ’em. They would, boy – crowned him king.’

A king with a crown and a belt of gold – Shady, the great runner, the great fighter, the great proud man.

‘Gittup ther’, Uncle Joe said, making the pony break into impetuous cantering past the spinny of blowing oak and hazel. ‘Aunt Nancy’ll be mad if we ain’t there for pudden time.’

By early evening the April wind was dying down. It no longer struck at the hay-stacks with swishing sea-sounds. The hazel catkins drooped, still and perpendicular, by the spinney side.

In his pocket the boy had the little loaf that was sometimes like a mouse, at others like a pincushion, but most of all like a toad with a pair of bright currant-black eyes.

It would be nice, he thought, if Shady, with nowhere

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to sleep, decided to come back to the hovel. The bread was just an idea. He hadn't eaten the loaf the night before because Aunt Nancy, in her shrilling, steamy way, kept saying it was too hot to eat at bedtime. New bread was bad for little boys at bedtime. It made them dream. It gave them nightmares.

The bread was quite cold now. It was also very hard and he didn't want it very much.

There was no Shady in the hovel. There was nothing there but a broken corn-drill, a pile of chaff and a rusty length of corrugated iron. A mere whisper of wind blew now and then at the chaff, but that was the only sound.

It was silly, perhaps, to think that Shady might be there, but it was just an idea. He would like to have seen, just once, for a moment, the great Shady, the uncrowned king with a belt of gold.

Turning away from the hovel, across the rickyard, he paused for a moment to stare at a pile of sacks laid at the foot of the third of the straw stacks. There was something odd about the sacks. They had a big yellow swede-turnip lying in the centre of them. There was something odd about the turnip too. Its sprouted pale elderberry-coloured shoots and the shoots, in turn, were held by a discoloured hand.

He wanted to say 'Hullo' to Shady. He wanted to say something about bringing him bread. But Shady, it seemed to him, was asleep. He was heavily embalmed under numbers of ragged sacks: two on his legs, another across his feet, two across his shoulders and another, like a hood, about his head. Wads of thick brown paper made a sort of waistcoat across his chest and several lengths of string held them in place there.

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Two familiar objects stood out from this paralysed heap of rag and bones: the moustache, grey now, that was like a bull's horns, and the frontal mass, matted and yellowish, of the curly, bull-like hair. There was no way of seeing the rest of the face. The head was drooped low, motionless either in sleep or thought, and the eyes were deep in shadow. It might have been, he thought, that a dead man was lying there.

At the gate of the rick-yard he turned to look back. There was now nothing to tell, in the falling twilight, that a man was lying there at all. The wind made up the smallest of motions, mere whispers, in the straw.

After some moments he put the little loaf on the top rail of the gate and left it there. It looked more than ever he thought, like a waiting, watching, listening toad.

When he turned again to look back from the side of the spinney the loaf too had become invisible in the April twilight. The sky was blue and clear and chilly. The wind had dropped completely and the straw stacks, so much the shape of the loaves that Nancy baked, stood as motionless as stones in a graveyard: marking in his mind, for ever, the place where Shady lay.

The Yellow Crab

MR PICKERING watched the crab emerge with sinister caution from its hole in the sand for the fourth time in fifteen minutes. It was quite unlike any other crab he had ever seen.

The first time it had almost frightened him. He had not been prepared for the strange black periscope eyes that suddenly lifted themselves up on a pair of inquisitive feelers above the little yellow spider body. At one moment the hot white sand was deserted. The next crab was there, fifteen inches away from his hand, watching him exactly as if it had trundled up at that precise spot to keep an engagement with him on the shore of the little bay.

‘Did you see the sun rise?’ Mrs Pickering said and carelessly he said, ‘Yes over there,’ pointing due north-westward at the same moment as he whispered.

‘It was marvellous, quite marvellous,’ Mrs Pickering said, ‘all orange and rose,’ and in a moment the crab, marching backwards, swifter than any spider, was gone again in the sand.

‘Now you’ve frightened him away,’ he said.

‘Frightened who?’

‘He’s never been really right out yet,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘He comes so far and then he sees me. I always wondered what the little holes in the sand were and now I know. He’s got eyes like shoe-buttons on the top of sticks.’

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

'Who are you talking about - '

'Not so loud,' Mr Pickering said, 'I want him to come out again.'

While he waited for another six or seven minutes, lying sideways on his face, watching the hole where the crab lay, Mrs Pickering made herself more comfortable in a shallow burrow in the sand. She stretched there plumply in a white silk bathing dress, her heavy legs and chest and shoulders a raw carmine red from the heat of sun and trade winds. Mr Pickering was much leaner, almost scraggy, and his taut skin had a neutral leathery sallowness that would not tan.

'You ought to get your swim if you're going to,' Mrs Pickering said.

He said, 'Damn,' in a whisper not loud enough for Mrs Pickering to hear. He had been perfectly sure the crab was coming up again at that moment. He felt sure he had caught the first glimpse of its sinister seedy eyes. Now it would be another five minutes, at least, before it made another try.

'I think we should get an early lunch and then take the car and do the drive to Fern Gully,' Mrs Pickering said.

She was sitting upright now, fatly squabbed, rubber-fleshed, brushing white-pink crystals of sand from her arms and calves and shoulders.

'I wish you wouldn't chatter,' he said. 'I want the crab to come out.'

'Oh! it's a crab,' she said. 'Why didn't you say so? I've seen hundreds of them.'

'Not like this one.'

'Is it yellow like a spider with sort of knitting needles on its head and it looks at you?'

THE YELLOW CRAB

When Mr Pickering began to say that it was and how did she know, Mrs Pickering idly flicked shining particles of sand from her body, gazing at the parallel bars of blue and white made across the sea by the steady motion of trade winds beyond the sheltered basin of the bay.

'I sat here all afternoon yesterday looking at them while you were over at the island. Rock Island or wherever it was. They come out when it's quiet. What were you doing there?'

Mr Pickering too sat up.

'I've got something to show you,' he said.

He put his hand into the pocket of his cream gaberdine trousers and threw over to Mrs Pickering something which fell without a sound into the powdery sand.

'Well, for heaven's sake what is it?' she said.

'I bet you never saw one of those before.'

'Well, what is it?'

'Look at it,' Mr Pickering said. 'Take a good look at it. I bet you never saw one before.'

Mrs Pickering gave a surprised fleshy laugh and said:

'Well, my goodness, it's some sort of dollar coin. Five!' she said. 'Five dollars.'

'Gold,' Mr Pickering said. 'American.'

'But we don't have gold.'

'And take a look at that,' Mr Pickering said. 'Guess what that is.'

He threw over to Mrs Pickering once again something which fell into dazzling soft sand without a sound.

'This isn't a dollar,' she said. 'This has got an animal or something on it. Sort of crocodile.'

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

'Dragon,' Mr Pickering said. 'St George killing the dragon. You know - St George of England.'

'You mean to say this is English?'

'English sovereign,' he said. 'Gold. Used to be worth about five dollars. Now it's worth double - treble, maybe.'

With careful indifference Mr Pickering got up and began to take his trousers off. Underneath them he was wearing loose-fitting crimson swimming trunks on the left leg of which was embroidered a picture in blue and white of a diving girl. Mr Pickering folded the trousers neatly and then carefully walked across to his wife and laid them in the broad lap made by her pink-skinned thighs.

'Look in the pocket,' he said. 'Go on. Take a look in the pocket.'

Across the sand, beyond a line of hurricane twisted palms, in front of the blue-walled hotel, a coloured boy in a white jacket was serving rum-punches to a group of sun-bathers lying under a vast orange umbrella. The sun flashed on the amber glasses, the tray, and the silver tongs of the ice container as the boy lifted them.

Mr Pickering pretended to watch all this with an absorbed but casual interest. In reality he was watching his wife slowly take from the pocket of his trousers seven dollar pieces and thirteen sovereigns.

'Now you know why I came down to the beach with my trousers on,' he said. 'I didn't know where the heck to leave the things. I got a funny feeling about them - felt they were sort of contraband.'

'You didn't - ?'

'Oh! no,' he said. 'They're legitimate enough. They're still currency - only you don't see 'em any more.'

THE YELLOW CRAB

'Then where on earth did you get them?'

'Bought 'em,' he said.

'But where?'

'Over at the island. Yesterday.' He smiled a leather-tight pursing sort of smile that brought his lips together in a thin and parsimonious line. 'And if I have any luck I'll buy some more today. Maybe a hundred. Maybe two.'

'You must be crazy,' she said. 'All your life you been making money. Now you start buying it. That's crazy.'

Mr Pickering sat down in the sand to unlace his crimson crêpe-soled deck shoes. In one of them was a spoonful of white sand and he slowly and thoughtfully poured it away like salt from the heel.

'You know the house along the road?' he said. 'The white one with the blue roof? The one you like so much? With the red bougainvillea on the walls?'

'I like that house - yes.'

'What say we buy it? - not now, but in a couple or three weeks. Before we go home?'

'But you know what they're asking for that house? They're asking - '

'I know what they're asking.'

'Well, you know we could never find that kind of money. Where would we find that crazy money? Not in Detroit, today.'

'We don't have to find it,' Mr Pickering said. 'It's here.'

Mr Pickering looked over his shoulder in time to see the coloured boy in the white jacket walking towards them with drinks on a tray.

'Wait till the boy's gone,' he said. 'Well, there you are! - how's the rum-swizzle trade?' The coloured boy smiled

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

and bent down and Mr Pickering took two red-golden punches from the tray. 'One of the things I like about this hotel is this free drink they give you mornings.'

'You pay for it,' Mrs Pickering said. 'You pay in the end.'

'I tell you what,' he said. 'I forgot my water-goggles. Boy, would you send somebody down with my water-goggles and my flippers - Room 17. Quick as you can, please.'

'Yessir.'

When the boy had gone Mr Pickering sat sucking rum through a straw and watching the long, almost phosphorescent lines of breakers spuming on the inner reefs of the bay. They were very beautiful in their pure curling regularity, like waves of bright-brushed hair. Beyond them the sea had the blueness of vitriol, with stripes of acid green, fading to sandy yellow, where the shallows were. Beyond that the thin low rocks of an island seemed like nothing more than a blue-brown floating board except when spray hit them, and leapt like a wild white horse into clear ocean beyond.

'It's all over there,' Mr Pickering said.

'On the island? How did you find that out?'

Mr Pickering sucked once more at the straws of his glass and then looked about him to see if anyone was coming. The boy had not come back.

'You've heard of Maxted,' he said.

'But that was a long time ago. That's closed, isn't it? Everybody's forgotten about that.'

'When a man's murdered nobody forgets about it. Especially the person who did the murder.'

Mrs Pickering played with sand, letting it run like

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iridescent mist through her podgy fingers, and said that she didn't see what the murder of the man named Maxted had to do with gold on Rock Island.

'Or for that matter with you.'

'The man had an empire,' he said. 'A bit here, a bit there. A fortune here, one over there – God, nobody knows how much he had. This is only one bit of it.'

'You're going to try to tell me he left odd fortunes lying around in gold pieces,' she said. 'Just for the picking up.'

'You might call it funk money,' he said. 'You might call it insurance. Some would. Dictators do it – a cache here and a cache there. You know, against the evil day.'

'The boy's coming with your goggles,' she said. 'You know I think I'll go to the hotel. I find it very nearly too hot to sit in the sun.'

'Just wait two minutes. While the boy's gone. Then I'll have my swim.'

The boy brought Mr Pickering's goggles, a pair of rubber frogmen flippers, and a telephone message on a tray.

'That's all right,' Mr Pickering said. He reached for his trousers and gave the boy two English shillings. 'That's fine. Thank you.'

The boy went away and Mrs Pickering said, 'Who is that from?'

'Man named Torgsen,' he said. 'You know the funny little pink house near the harbour? Has shells and sea-fans and goddam porcupine fish hanging up outside? He keeps that. He's got a motor boat – he's going to take me across to the island.'

'This afternoon?'

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‘Two o’clock,’ he said. ‘He’s the one who knows all about it.’

‘If he knows all about it why doesn’t he keep it to himself? What’s he have to let you in on it for?’

‘Now you’ve hit it,’ Mr Pickering said.

He was fitting on his flippers. When both of them were fixed his feet had the appearance of those of a giant green duck.

‘They’re all scared to hell,’ he said. ‘Everybody knows just enough to scare everybody else.’

‘About the murder or about the money?’

‘Both,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘When war broke out Maxted salted away about a quarter of a million in gold coinage on the island. The island belonged to him anyway and he had three motor-boats keeping trespassers away. That’s what I mean about funk money.’

Mrs Pickering said she understood that the funk money but not about Torgsen. ‘Why should that old junk-store shell-collector know anything?’ she said. ‘He looks like a soaker to me.’

‘He’s a remarkable man,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘Maxted made a pal of him. He liked catching out-of-the-way fish and getting Torgsen to set them up. You soak them in formaldehyde and then they harden up in the sun. Maxted had a big collection, all done by Torgsen.’

Thoughtfully Mr Pickering began to polish the eye pieces of his goggles.

‘If the money was so hush-hush I don’t see how Torgsen got to know about it anyway,’ Mrs Pickering said.

‘Maxted began to pay him in gold,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘That’s how.’

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‘I don’t see how that makes sense.’

‘Oh! yes,’ he said. ‘That makes sense. That was the vanity part. It wasn’t only that Maxted liked empires. He liked behaving like an emperor. Sometimes he’d go in to see Torgsen and if a fish wasn’t ready he’d knock Torgsen down. One day he pressed his thumbs under his eyes until his eyeballs stuck out.’

Mrs Pickering began to say that she did not wonder that Maxted, making so many enemies, had been murdered at last, but Mr Pickering said:

‘Funny thing, he made friends that way too. Torgsen was a friend. Every time Maxted knocked him down or shoved his eyeballs out he’d come back next day in a terrible state – remorse and all that – and beg forgiveness and say what a brute he’d been and what could he do to show how sorry he was?’

‘Torgsen was the fool.’

‘Oh! no,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘I don’t think so. Maxted would give him ten or twenty pounds as sort of compensation. Easy money. Then one day he kicked him in the belly and knocked him unconscious – and then next day Maxted was in a terrible way and that was when he paid him in gold.’

Mrs Pickering in a bored way got up and put her wrap on her shoulders and thrust her feet into her pink sisal-grass beach shoes that had an embroidery of pale green and blue shells on the toes.

‘It all sounds like drink to me,’ she said. ‘Anyway I’m going up to change now. Don’t be very long. You know how it is if we’re not in there when the gong goes.’

‘He was a drunk all right,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘But that

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

doesn't alter the fact that Torgsen can buy dollars and sovereigns on the island. That's a fact you can't get away from.'

'I'd better take your trousers, hadn't I?' she said. 'I'll put the coins in my handbag. By the way, what do you give for them?'

'They're glad to get about twenty per cent less than they're worth,' he said. He laughed with brown, leathery acquisitive lips. 'Figure it out while you're dressing.'

Mr Pickering put his goggles on and flapped down to the sea like a semi-naked, balding, upright frog. For some time he swam in and among the low reefs protecting the little inner bay from the trade winds that blew beyond the headland. The water everywhere was so clear and limpid that he could see in these sea-gardens shoals of blue and orange fish, a few inches long, and larger fish of striped pink and blue. The seaweed, rose-violet in places, chocolate in others, sometimes bright yellow, waved everywhere about him with the gentle torment of shoals of anchored eels.

When he came out of the sea and went back to his place on the beach he lay there for some time with his face upturned to the sky. The sun was very hot and there was no sound in the air except the small folding lap of minute waves eating into smooth white sand.

'Somebody knows,' Mr Pickering told himself. 'Somebody must know.'

In that moment he remembered the crab; and as he turned his head he saw to his surprise and delight that it had come out again to look at him, poised on its wiry yellow legs, with its queer, ghoulish, disembodied little eyes.

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'Part of it's under the sea,' Mr Pickering said, 'or in the sea. I found out that much.'

'You know, you came here to relax,' Mrs Pickering said. 'Trying to pick a murderer is no way to recuperate after pleurisy.'

'I'm not trying to pick any murderer,' he said. 'I'm interested in picking up a fortune.'

'Just the same, one links with the other,' she said. 'And anyway it doesn't relax you.'

'I feel great,' he said. 'You got to give your mind something to do anyway, haven't you? You just can't sit the whole time.' Mr Pickering, in three weeks of Caribbean sun, watching the infinite blues of Caribbean waters, had almost forgotten the harsh and competitive world he had left in Detroit. Sometimes he took from his wallet one of the cards which Charlie Muller, his partner, and himself had fixed up after long deliberation and which both of them thought was pretty good. 'We insure anything,' it said, 'and sell the world.' These words and the cards on which they were printed, together with *Pickering & Muller: Brokers*, seemed no longer real when seen through the foggy distances of three weeks of time. Nor did Charlie Muller seem real; nor the high offices from which Mr Pickering and his associate and six stenographers looked across the wintry lake and the wintry Canadian distances beyond. It was surprising, Mr Pickering thought, how a world could slip away from you; surprising, too, how another, the world of Torgsen and Maxted's murder and Maxted's gold, could so insidiously replace it and so soon. 'Well, I got a hundred and eighty dollars worth,' he said.

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

‘Let’s sit here,’ Mrs Pickering said, ‘and watch the sunset.’

Mrs Pickering’s passion for watching sunrise and sunset brought them every evening, in the hour before dinner, to a small promontory on the eastern edge of the bay. Below, on the white beach, the long line of hurricane-stricken palms, in almost horizontal curves, took on the strange appearance of gigantic scimitars in the gold-rose glow of dying light. The enormous sinking sun set the calmest of seas on fire. On top of the promontory was a wooden seat above which grew trees of incense covered with small trails of parasite orchids of pinkish mauve, uncommonly like butterflies, and the air was heavy with the drenching sweetness of the incense flowers.

‘Look at the sea now,’ Mrs Pickering said. ‘Every wave has a pink tip on it. Look at it now – isn’t that heavenly? In a minute it’ll be orange or yellow or something – it changes so quickly.’

Mr Pickering looked at the sea and saw on its brilliant surface, four hundred yards from shore, a long dark boat, narrow like a canoe, piled high with what seemed to be a system of wrecked hen-coops.

‘There go the craw-fish boys,’ he said. ‘Setting their pots. That’s another thing I have to do – spear craw-fish.’

‘It’s all red now,’ Mrs Pickering said. ‘Look! – it’s all red like fire.’

‘You suppose they do catch craw-fish?’ Mr Pickering said. ‘Could be they didn’t – you know, it could be! –’ he suddenly got up from the seat, descended the small flight of steps that had been cut into the black rock of the promontory and went down to the edge of the sea.

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Over by the thin brown reef the boat had stopped. Mr Pickering peered across the green-red sunset waters and watched as one after another the hen-coop craw-fish pots were pitched into the sea. He could see in the boat two brown-skin boys wearing tattered grey shirts and sombre trilby hats. He could see clearly the splash of each craw-fish pot whitening the delicate surface of the sea. Then the rock of the reef itself seemed to leap up from the surrounding liquid fire with such striking solidity that Mr Pickering was suddenly overwhelmed with the brilliance of an astounding idea.

‘Look – that’s it, that’s it,’ he said. ‘I bet you a million to one that’s how Maxted hid it. Torgsen says it’s under the sea – and I bet all the tea in China that’s how it got there.’

A double echo of his voice, strangely contrived between rock and sea, brought back to him the sudden realization that he was speaking to himself. He ran back up the steps. Mrs Pickering was standing in a posture of bent rapture against the low concrete wall built round the top of the little cliff. Mr Pickering, running in rubber-soled shoes, seized her elbow so suddenly that she gave a short cry, startled.

‘Oh! you scared me. You really did – I was watching the sun just disappearing – look at it, you can see it moving. Look – it’s going down.’

‘I just figured it out,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘It’s simple really. Obvious. Maxted liked these rare fish. He loved poking about these reefs – used to spend days at it, Torgsen says. So what does he do? he puts the stuff there – there are millions of these damn reefs and cays where you

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could hide stuff and nobody would ever know. Well, nobody – somebody knows. Torgsen knows.'

'It gets dark so quickly,' she said. 'Look, there's only a tip of the sun now. It's just like a fingernail – just like a red lacquered fingernail. Don't you think so?'

'Ah-ah,' he said. 'That's beautiful. You see the crawfish boys are going back now. Funny how they always come just at the same time.'

The scarlet upper tip of sun slid with arresting swiftness below the horizon, leaving the sea smouldering with wavelets of pure orange touched by strokes of eucalyptus green. The air fell suddenly so dead calm that the dip of the single stern oar of the crawfish boat threw a distinct snap in the air as it flipped at the sea.

'It won't be long now before the fire-flies are out,' Mrs Pickering said. 'I love it when the fire-flies begin.'

Until this long southern vacation Mrs Pickering had never seen fire-flies before, and her first sight of them in the hot sub-tropical darkness, like dancing gas-green glow-worms, had startled her almost as much as the crab had startled Mr Pickering when he first saw it in the sand.

'And that reminds me. You know, I found out something about them,' she said. 'I was reading it in a magazine while you were over at the island this afternoon. Those lights they have – they're signals.'

'What of?' Mr Pickering said. 'Danger?'

'No. It's like morse-code – I mean semaphore. Each of these flashes is in a sort of code – either it's one, two, one, or it's two, one, one, or something like that, and it's a signal from the female to male.'

'About what?'

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'About love. About mating and all that. The male one flies around on his own wave-length or whatever you call it, one, two, one, until he finds a girl-friend on the same wave-length making his signal.'

'Then they clinch, I suppose?'

'I think it's the most beautiful thing,' she said.

Mr Pickering did not answer this time and his wife sat with enraptured patience looking at the sea. All its colours were dissolving and softening down to one colour – at least you thought it was one colour until you looked, as she did now, with eyes of half-closed penetration, and then you saw that it was an iridescence of fifty colours, perhaps a hundred, perhaps more, each small wave with its smeared brush-stroke of tenderest coloured light.

'You know, it's funny,' Mr Pickering said. 'You mention this murder and they all start talking about the price of bananas or some damn thing. Nobody wants to talk.'

'I can understand that,' she said. 'It's ten years ago, so why not let it rest? It's over and done with. And a good thing.'

'Not on your life,' Mr Pickering said. 'The murderer's here on this island. And don't tell me that's a good thing. They sometimes do it again, you know that.'

'All right. Have you a theory?'

'Not yet,' he said. 'But I probably will have after I've been over to Cat Cay tomorrow. That's just a lump of reef and sand over on the other side of Rock Island. You don't see it from here. But I'll bet my office to a nickel that's where the other part of the gold is.'

'Nearly dark now. Only blue and tiny bits of yellow on the water. You can feel the wind turning, can't you?'

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During the daytime the wind, the trade-wind, fresh and warm and illuminating the dark blue water with bars of snow foam, came from the sea. At night it blew from the mountains.

‘Didn’t they try a man once for it and let him off?’ Mrs Pickering said.

‘They did.’

‘Then don’t you think they’d have tried someone else if the murderer is here on the island? After all it’s so little. Just a few thousand people, that’s all.’

‘You got it there,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘It’s little – so everybody knows everybody. Everybody knows something. Everybody knows and everybody keeps his mouth shut.’

Mrs Pickering straightened up at last from her position of enraptured patience by the concrete wall. The sea was almost dark now, pure indigo, the sky above it a soft-washed green fading, far up, to palest night blue. The colours of the parasite orchids could not be seen in the incense trees. The palms and the big striped aloes on the hotel terrace were simply blackened shadows.

‘I think that’s what you should do,’ Mrs Pickering said. ‘Keep your mouth shut.’

‘I got a sort of feeling we came here just in time,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘A year or two back you’d never have gotten the chance of this stuff. Plenty of money about. They were holding on. Now money’s getting tight. Plenty tight. So they’re unloading. It’s the ground floor.’

They had begun to walk down the rocky path from the high point of the promontory towards the hotel and the shore. Sea and sky were now almost joined in one dark

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blue mass together and the mountains, with their lower fringes of enormous palms, seemed to be on the point of stumbling into the sea.

‘I still don’t get why all these people have got these gold dollars and sovereigns to sell anyway,’ Mrs Pickering said.

‘You got to pay to keep mouths shut, haven’t you?’ he said. ‘See?’

‘I see.’

Mr Pickering laughed in the warm darkness. A sudden turn of wind, like the enlarged echo of his voice, woke in the brittle fronds of the hurricane-bent palms a metallic chatter that ran out towards the dark surface of the sea.

‘Oh! Look!’ Mrs Pickering said. ‘The fire-flies! Making their signals!’

Lying on the sand the following afternoon, Mrs Pickering watched the crab continually emerge from its neat hole with the same sinister caution as before. Several times during the afternoon it ran from the hole as much as ten or fifteen inches before it became aware of her and scuttled back. There was something horribly repulsive, she thought, about the way a crab ran backwards. Nor did she feel easy about the grotesque, upraised periscope eyes that seemed almost to swivel on the little yellow head. Each time they left her with the chilling impression that the crab was really a monster that time had dwarfed.

She wished all afternoon that Mr Pickering would come. She had something to tell Mr Pickering. She did not know whether it was important or whether it was one of those things women just said for the sake of saying something,

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but she had been talking after lunch to a Mrs Archibald, a Vermonter. She had always understood that Vermonters were queer birds – somebody had once told her that Vermonters had all the eggs and butter and cream that they wanted during war-time simply because the idea of rationing was something no Vermonter could possibly stomach. She thought that was disgraceful and also that this Mrs Archibald was the type that buttonholed you in corners and kept you there whether you liked it or not.

It was about the Maxted murder that Mrs Archibald had spoken. She and her husband had been on the island three years before and on that occasion there was a young woman from Chicago or St Paul or somewhere who was investigating the case – not officially, Mrs Archibald said, just poking her nose in.

‘And her they found wrapped up on the sea-shore,’ Mrs Archibald said. ‘In a sack.’

As she heard this Mrs Pickering felt a stab of coldness drive through the centre of her spine. She guessed it was really that same feeling, uneasy and nervous and chilling, that she re-experienced every time the crab ran backwards towards its hole.

By five o’clock she had begun to be uneasy too about Mr Pickering; she was certain he ought to be back. She was uneasy also about being alone on the deserted shore. Most people seemed to lie on their beds in the afternoon and for nearly three hours there had been no one on the sand but herself and the crab.

Then soon after five o’clock she saw that in the quietness two herons, a young one and its mother, had come to fish along the shaken edge of sea. They were so delicate

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and pretty: so graceful, so unlike the crab. The mother had a dark dove-coloured sheen on her feathers and her legs were blue. The young bird had feathers of bottle green and its smaller body seemed cast on the water like the shadow of the larger bird.

The sight of the birds, so delicate and undisturbed, calmed all of her feelings about Mrs Archibald, the crab, and the young woman who had been found in a sack: so that when Mr Pickering at last appeared she had nothing to say but:

‘Oh! Ed dear, look at the birds. Look at their legs – just the colour of the sea so the fish won’t see them. And look at the baby one, the way it does what its mother does. Oh! I’ve had fun watching them.’

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘But wait till you hear –’

‘Oh! that’s all right. I’ve had such fun watching the birds. What did you do?’

‘The darndest thing,’ Mr Pickering said.

‘On Cat Cay?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘Right along the coast here.’

‘Oh! Look at the herons. Just look. The young one’s trying to catch something –’

‘Met a fellow named Wilson. Quite a piece of dark blood in him – you can see that. Just a nobody. Torgsen says his mother kept a house on the waterfront – this Wilson fellow was the result of some damn Glasgow deck-hand dropping in one time. Just scum.’

‘The young one is so pretty,’ Mrs Pickering said. ‘What about him?’

‘Incredible,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘He’s living like

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Croesus. Like Rockefeller. He's got a palace along the coast here with onyx bathrooms and Louis Quatorze toilets and God knows what. He owns three sugar mills and two banana plantations and a steam yacht – Oh! and that reminds me, I knew there must be a woman in this somewhere.'

'Why?'

The two herons had paraded far along the shore and now had turned and were dreamily coming back.

'Because Maxted was mad on them. He ran five or six at a time. You know what? – he'd hang about the harbour until he saw some popsie in on a cruise-ship that he fancied and then he'd take her home and give her a house and set her up. Not satisfied with one or two – but five or six. The big possessor.'

'And is Mr Wilson fond of the ladies too?'

Mr Pickering laughed.

'You're pretty smart, aren't you, Mrs Pickering?'

'I just thought.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Mr Wilson is fond of the ladies. And it seems Mr Wilson and Mr Maxted were once fond of the same lady. A girl named Louie. In fact the week before Maxted was murdered they all spent a week-end on Maxted's yacht. And now Louie is Mrs Wilson.'

'That's no surprise. Did you see her?'

'No.'

'And what made you go to see Mr Wilson anyway instead of going to Cat Cay? – Oh! look, the little heron is lost. It's turned around the wrong way and can't see its mother.'

'Seems he'd heard of me, that's all,' Mr Pickering said.

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‘He’s got big connexions in insurance – and seems he’d even heard of us. Said he’d like to see me.’

‘And just you think, there are people who kill and stuff those lovely things and put them in glass cases – Oh! look at them! –’

‘You know what I think? – and I told Torgsen so. I think Louie killed Maxted.’

Along the shore the parent heron, gazing down with dreaminess at the blue-green evening sky, seemed to be waiting for its young, and Mrs Pickering gave a quick cry of maternal delight.

‘They’re so intelligent too,’ she said. ‘You see, she knows!’

‘Fascinating, isn’t it?’ Mr Pickering said. ‘Of course it might not be. But before Maxted was murdered Wilson hadn’t a bean. Just a hanger-on. But Louie had – Maxted had seen to that. And now Wilson has all the beans he needs and Louie too.’

Suddenly along the shore the herons were flying. Mrs Pickering gave a cry of dismay and saw that two bathers were running down, carrying white and scarlet wraps, from the hotel to the sea.

‘They’ve frightened them away!’

‘That reminds me,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘I meant to have had my swim.’

‘Oh! it’s too late now. Let’s walk instead. You can have your swim before breakfast.’

‘I guess the morning’s better,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘Anyway I need more time – I got to practise with the new diving outfit Wilson lent me.’

‘Wilson lent you?’

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

‘It’s the latest thing,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘Cost the earth and it’s pretty complicated. But you can stay under for a couple of hours. You should come diving, you know, it’s a beautiful new world down there. The colours are out of this world –’

‘I don’t swim that well,’ she said. ‘By the way, what about the gold? Where does that fit in?’

The first breeze from landward, a mere breath, seemed to creep down the mountain slopes as Mr and Mrs Pickering turned to walk across the sand.

‘It could be Louie again,’ Mr Pickering said, ‘couldn’t it? Louie was the favourite girl when the gold was salted down. I’ll bet Louie knows where it is. And now and then, as I say, a little comes in handy for palm-oil.’

‘It’s too fantastic.’

‘I guess life is too,’ Mr Pickering said, ‘isn’t it? Those dollars and sovereigns have got to come from somewhere. And it’s smart for these boys to sell them when they can.’

Mrs Pickering, hardly listening, turned to see if the herons had come back to the shore, but the two delicate figures, no more than stringless kites, were sailing seaward past the edge of the promontory.

‘By the way,’ Mr Pickering said. ‘Did you see my friend the crab?’

‘Yes,’ she said and in the humid evening she felt once again the quick cold stab of repulsion go thinly down her spine. ‘He was there. The ugly thing.’

Next morning when Mr Pickering came down to the shore, about six o’clock, nothing moved there except the

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two herons gracefully wading along the bright shallow edge of sea. They flew up at his approach and settled farther along the white sea-flattened sand as Mr Pickering sat down to put his flippers on. Out on the expanse of rose-blue sea nothing moved except a small out-island fruit boat, slowly tacking with full white sail in the breathless air across the gold-pink path of rising sun.

When Mr Pickering had fixed his flippers he once again had the appearance of a semi-naked, balding, upright frog. It took him some time to adjust the breathing apparatus, with its long curved tube and its big protuberant face mask, and to fix the oxygen bottle comfortably to his chest. He put on the mask and took it off again several times before it fitted.

‘The trouble is it’s so damn buoyant,’ Wilson had said. ‘You may find difficulty in stopping under. But you can get over that by carrying a weight or something. Put a basket on your back for your fish and put a rock in the bottom. That’ll hold you down.’

‘I never keep my fish with me,’ Torgsen said. ‘Spear ’em and bring ’em up – that’s what I say in these waters. I don’t want no shark sniffing for me.’

‘This thing’s different,’ Wilson said. ‘It’s designed for stopping down. You can stay down a couple of hours with no bother. There’s no point in keep coming up.’

Just before Mr Pickering succeeded in fixing his oxygen breathing apparatus the long curved boat of the craw-fish boys drew smoothly past the end of the promontory. Mr Pickering waved his hand, but the two brown-skin boys, rowing quickly, were too far away to reply. When the boat had disappeared the sea was completely empty between

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

the long dark reef and the curious half-frog, half-warrior figure of Mr Pickering, entering the water with his blue water-spear upraised in his hand.

Soon, as the sun rose higher, it struck the black edge of the promontory of rock, heightening the startling yellow band of high-water mark. It flared too on the incense trees, lighting up the trailed butterfly ribbons of the rosy parasite orchid flowers. After nearly two hours it spread with full harsh whiteness on the entire shore, deserted except for the two herons daintily walking in the sea, the young one so like a green shadow of the other. It burned down on Mr Pickering's bright-flowered abandoned dressing wrap and on his empty crimson shoes.

And presently it fell too on the black eyes of the yellow crab, emerging with sinister caution from its hole in the sand – once again as if it had an appointment with Mr Pickering that Mr Pickering had not, for some reason, been able to keep after all.

Daughters of the Village

AT noon the seven women stacked their hoes by the fence and sat on a bank of grass and broom, at the end of the sugar-beet field, where the track came up by a wood of hazels.

'I'm goin' a-sit more in the lew o' the wood today,' Ma Hawkins said. 'I sat out there yesterday and the wind cut holes in me breeches.'

'Puzzle it to cut through mine,' Poll Sankey said. 'I got two pair on. Me thick 'uns and me thin 'uns.'

'Hark at old Poll!' they all said. 'Hark at Poll! – Poll's off again.'

Blue as water, pale and never still, a field of flax stirred with limp and tender waves below the field of sugar beet, cool green and glittering in the midday sun. Columns of sweet chestnuts in fresh dusty yellow flowers were piled high beyond it, crested with breezy summer cloud that swept big brushes of shadow across the long blue hollow.

'I'll git me joint out,' Poll said. 'Who wants a cut off me joint? Don't all speak at once – and them as open their mouths don't say nothing!'

In the breezy air, cool for July, the laughing voices of the women were scattered like a crackle of crows.

'Hark at old Poll!' they said. 'Hark at old Poll! Hark at her!'

Ma Hawkins filled her mouth with beetroot until her lips were scarred with purple. 'You can see where we

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bin today,' she said. 'We made a mark on 'em today.'

'Jist as well,' Liz Borden said. 'A mite higher and they'll strangle us.'

Thistle and bind-weed and dock and fat-hen lay curled like a grey cast of snake-skins down the rows of beet, dying in the sun.

'Gawd! - she must think I'm slimming!' Poll said. 'Look at it - one bit o' bacon and half a yard o' rind. Just like our Ma. Grabs up the first thing she sees and puts it between two bits o' bread and calls it dinner. One day she'll pack the cat up.'

Liz Borden, grey and straight as a slit fence rail, said in a smeary voice that Poll had enough on her to last till Michaelmas if she never had another mite in her lips.

'Me?' Poll said. 'There's no fat on me. It's what I'm saving up to get married with.'

She slapped her hands on the tight broad front of her body, running them over the great curves of her hips and down the taut bulges of her thighs. Her eyes were fresh and black as berries in a big happy face of burnt rose colour, with strong white teeth and masses of tangled blue-black hair. When she laughed the sound came up from down in her throat like a coarse burst of brass, a deep fleshy trumpet call.

'I'm just ripening off,' Poll said. 'That's all. That's how they like it.'

'It ain't all fruit as'll keep,' Liz Borden said.

'No, and it ain't all fruit as wants to.'

'Good old Poll,' they said. 'Poll's off again!'

'Where's Phebe?' Ma Hawkins said. She was like a bag of sun-brown leather with a few windy bristles of

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grey sticking out from under the apron she had tied over her head.

‘In the wood,’ they said.

‘Pauline’ll soon be here,’ Cath Johnson said. ‘It’ll soon be time for Pauline to be here with the baby.’ She, the youngest, was eating pale red-orange cherries and hanging others, in pairs, on her small delicate ears, under close brown cushions of side hair.

‘Anybody dancing tonight?’ Poll said. ‘I think I’ll go. Help to fill the floor up.’

Phebe Harlow, a tall high-cheeked girl with long fine legs and pale brown arms, came out of the wood and sat on the bank and began to comb her hair. The hair was blonde-yellow and smooth and she combed it down with slow fine strokes until it fell in a curtain over her lowered face.

‘Dancing tonight, Phebe?’ Poll said.

‘I might.’

‘I think I will if Harry’ll take me,’ Poll said.

All of them except Phebe Harlow laughed about Harry. Everybody knew about Harry. Harry came across by the field once a day, perhaps twice, a gnome on an orange tractor, a little man with a flat black head and piercing doleful blue eyes that searched the skirts of the women and roved along the line of bodies bowed against cross-winds as they hoed the fields.

‘Harry’ll come if I ask him,’ Poll said.

‘Ask him!’ they said. ‘Go on – ask him!’

‘See me with Harry,’ she said.

‘Ask him – go on, Poll, ask him!’ they said. ‘He’ll be by at one o’clock. He’ll be coming by to the hay-field.’

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'See me dancing with Harry,' Poll said. 'His head wouldn't come up to me belt. I'd laugh like a drain.'

'See what he says – ask him,' they said.

Pairs of cherries danced deep orange on Cath Johnson's ears, and Phebe Harlow shook back her hair from her face and fingered pale gold strands of it left shining on the comb. Wind caught her hair and separated it suddenly into transparency, letting sunlight through it, turning it more white than yellow. She looked as if about to be blown away on skeined soft wings.

'You want to be careful about laughing at men,' she said. 'That's the way it starts.'

'Not with me,' Poll said. 'I'm laughing all the time and it's never started yet.'

'My sister's gal up at Ulcumbe laughed at a chap,' Liz Borden said. 'Met him in a pub and laughed at his neck-tie. She and two more gigglin' bits o' work stood and laughed at his neck-tie. Afore she knew where she were she married him and now she's got four.'

'That's what I want to do,' Poll said. 'Laugh and have thousands of kids. Thousands of 'em. I've got to have kids. I've got to have a man.'

'Harry!' they said.

'He's so little I'd lose him in bed,' she said.

'Hark at Poll!' they said. 'Poll's off! Poll's off again.'

'You be careful about laughing,' Phebe Harlow said.

A running breeze clapped down the rows of sugar-beet, turning the leaves over so that they whitened briefly in the sun. It caught at the skirts and the dinner-papers of the seven women and blew Phebe Harlow's hair into lighter transparency. It freshened gustily about Ma Hawkins, who

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said she could feel it blowing holes in her trousers again. It rattled the brown pods of broom seeds and finally it brought the cough of a tractor, coming up the track from below the wood of hazels.

‘Harry!’ the women said. ‘Poll! – it’s Harry. Get ready.’

‘He’s got eyes,’ Poll said. ‘He can see me, can’t he? – there’s enough of me.’

Phebe Harlow stopped combing her hair and stretched herself on the bank, her arms making a cushion under her head, her legs apart. The breeze crept about her, stirring the edges of skirt and hair, seeming suddenly to blow the lids of her eyes shut, covering them with a veil of olive-blue.

Poll Sankey slapped her thighs and said, ‘Come on, Harry. Some of us are laying down waiting a’ready – oh! Harry, I want you like a Sunday joint – Harry, you’re my leg o’ lamb – Harry, I’m hungry for my leg o’ lamb –’

‘Gal, for Gawd’s sake,’ Ma Hawkins said, ‘they’ll hear you down at Benacre.’

Everybody giggled except Phebe Harlow. A quiver like another run of wind went through the women as Cath Johnson said the tractor was coming through the gate and she’d better make up her lips for Harry. Her neat young lips were already wet with cherry-stain and now she began to turn them a redder, richer orange with smears of bitten fruit. Her ears were delicate and looked mischievous when the pairs of cherries trembled about them, and she called:

‘Who wants a cherry? Any more for a cherry before Harry comes?’

‘Save ’em for Harry,’ Poll Sankey said.

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'You save 'em for yourself,' Liz Borden said. 'Let him buy his own.'

The tractor, like a creeping orange sloth beaded at the head with two piercing eyes of pale sky-blue, drew up by the bank with a dying roar. Harry pushed an oil-black cap to the back of his head and scratched a mob of ageless mouse-brown hair and spat at the earth, showing cheerful teeth of gaping brown.

'Ah! here's Harry! – how's Harry?' they all said, as if Harry were now a surprise to them. 'Windy enough for you, Harry?'

'All depends what it's a-blowin',' Harry said.

His fierce little eyes roved from the cherried ears of Cath Johnson to Phebe Harlow's long sleeping brown legs and then to Poll Sankey lifting her big mocking breast and laughing at him with fleshy lips and black rolling eyes.

'Had y' dinners?' Harry said.

'Just waitin' for the leg o' lamb, Harry,' Poll said.

All the women laughed and said Poll was off again and Harry laughed too, his eyes giving off fierce male spurts, blue and dancing.

'Don't want a nice bit o' sauce on it, I reckon?' Harry said.

'You got plenty,' Liz Borden said, and Harry, with cracked teeth and a low droll glint of blue from half-closed eyes that suddenly leapt open again to a wink, said:

'Ain't got enough to waste on old mutton, know that.'

'Then you keep it to yourself!' she said. 'You ain't so young and tender.'

'I'm very like a lot tender'n you think,' Harry said. 'Here and there –'

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'He's tender-hearted,' Poll said. 'That's one thing. Ain't you, Harry? We all know he's tender-hearted.'

'There's ways o' finding that out,' he said.

'Harry!' Cath Johnson said. 'How do you like my earrings, Harry? I just got my lips up for you, Harry! How d'ye like them, Harry?'

'Looks like some young heifer-calf bin a-lickin' ship reddle,' Harry said.

Cath Johnson, with little screams, fired cherry-stones that fell about the tractor without touching him. He surveyed the seven women with glinting hungry eyes that reflected the white and blue of cloud and sky, settling at last on Phebe Harlow, lying with body now wind-flattened on the bank, blonde and sleepy in the sun.

'Dancing tonight, Harry?' Poll said.

'Poll wants you to go with her, Harry!' Cath Johnson said. 'She wants you to take her!'

'Not me. I don't want splinters in my knees,' Poll said.

'Don't mind sittin' out,' Harry said.

'Nor anywheres else!' she said and when all the women had laughed again Harry cocked his hat farther on the back of his head, letting his eyes stop roving for a moment or two, and said:

'I think I'll take Janey. Eh, Janey? Janey's my drop.'

Nobody knew how old Janey was. Janey looked tired. Her forehead, foreshortened and flattened, was screwed into monkey-like wrinkles above which her straight dark hair was cut low and angular.

'Eh, Janey? Come and dance with me, Janey?'

Janey smiled.

'Janey's not your type,' Poll said. 'Janey's slimming.'

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You want something with a bit more meat on. You don't want lean girls like Janey. Does he, Janey?'

Janey smiled.

'If they're too fat it ain't so well,' Harry said. 'And if they're too lean it ain't so well. I like a bit o' lean and then a bit o' fat and then a bit o' lean and then a drop o' gravy.'

'You don't want much do you?' Poll said.

'No,' Harry said, 'but it don't stop me lookin' in the shop window.'

'Gawd, man, you talk enough for fifty,' Ma Hawkins said. 'You're allus wound up.'

'Got seven on y' t' answer back,' Harry said, 'that's why.'

'That hay'll be cooked afore you git up to that field, that's a sure thing,' Liz Borden said. 'But that don't matter, does it? You're in no hurry, are you?'

'I wadn' born in 'urry,' Harry said.

Down the track, beyond the gently sputtering tractor, at the edge of the hazel copse, a girl appeared with a green and yellow scarf tied over her head, young and prettily dark and pushing a pram.

'It's Pauline,' Cath Johnson said. 'It's Pauline with the baby.'

Ma Hawkins said to Harry, with dry tartness:

'And she don't want it poisoned, neither. Not with tractor stink. Git back to work.'

'Work, they call it,' Liz Borden said. 'Sittin' on their backsides all day.'

Harry faced the women squarely, masculine, perky-eyed, undefeated and with roving curiosity, and said, Ah! well, he supposed he'd better be thinking of gettin' on.

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'Thinkin'!' Liz Borden said. 'Don't fer Gawd's sake start thinkin'.'

'See y' at the dance then, Poll?' he said.

'Not me,' Poll said. 'I got lumbago in both knees now.'

'I'll rub 'em for you,' Harry said. 'What about Phebe? Ain't bin a word out o' Phebe.'

'Phebe's having her beauty sleep,' Poll said.

'There's people who ought to git more o' that,' Harry said.

'They ought,' Poll said. 'But it's one thing to go to sleep and another to wake lookin' no different.'

'You ought to know,' Harry said.

'Git back to work,' Liz Borden said. 'For Gawd's sake. I'll be burned if you don't jaw wuss'n all the women.'

'Yes, git back!' they all said to him. 'For Heaven's sake. And let them work as want to work.'

Harry, as if at last he caught a change, a chill, or a sourness in the air, let in his gears and moved slowly away up the track, the orange tractor trailing a light blue cloud. As he did so he cast one final look at the women, the rows of beet and the weeds dying about the field and called:

'Don't reckon there'll be much sugar in the beet this year.'

'Ain't likely, is it?' Ma Hawkins yelled after him, 'with you breathin' on it?'

Cath Johnson ran to meet the baby and what Harry said was never heard.

'Oh! here's my man!' Poll Sankey said. 'Let me have him. This is the one for me. He's not down to sleep, is he?'

'He's sitting up,' Cath Johnson said.

'There's a man for you,' Poll Sankey said. 'Look at him. There's a man. There's my beauty.'

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The women, crowding about the baby as if he were some sort of idol, securely bound by straps, on an altar of pillows, made sounds like pigeons. His mother unstrapped him and Poll Sankey took him up. She too made pigeon noises into his face and carried him away to the bank with her, sitting down there and putting him on her lap.

‘My man’s growing, isn’t he?’ she said softly. ‘Oh! he grows – he grows every time I see him, I think I’ll wait for him – I can wait for you, my beauty, can’t I? It won’t be long.’

‘How’s his teeth?’ Ma Hawkins said.

The young mother smiled and said his teeth were beautiful. They were coming through fast now, she said, and Phebe Harlow sat up at last, drowsy-eyed, looking at her. Everybody knew there was a soldier in it somewhere, she thought, and she began combing her hair again with soft long thoughtful strokes, as if wondering who the soldier was.

Then Ma Hawkins said: ‘He’s a handful now, I’ll be bound. You’ll have your hands full now, this summer.’

‘I had seven afore I turned thirty,’ old Mrs Godden said. ‘If you want to talk about handfuls – ’ Her mouth, open to speak for the first time, was specked at its quivering edges with fragile crumbs. Her hands held the air like gentle claws grasping to regain something that had been snatched away from her. Against the young mother and the cherry-ears of Cath Johnson she was stony and dry, like a scarred rock hewn a long time from earth.

‘You beauty!’ Poll Sankey said. ‘Oh! you sweet beauty!’

Cath Johnson came to dangle cherries before the baby’s

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face, bewildering him, and then Poll Sankey lay on her back, letting him lie and crawl across her big fat breast, laughing at him with enormous rolling-eyes, shaking him gently against the sky.

'You're my man, aren't you?' she said. 'You're the man for me.'

In the hot sun a crackle of broom-pods woke Liz Borden, dozing on the grass. Old Mrs Godden began to sharpen the edge of her hoe with short keen strokes of a file, her hands crabbed over like claws that had fossilized. Ma Hawkins and Janey got up to fetch their hoes, Janey staring at the baby, eyes unsmiling under low brows. Phebe Harlow finished combing her hair at last and tied it up with a big handkerchief of spotted blue, tying it from the back, as none of the other women did, with the knot on the crest of her forehead, and then spreading it out in wings.

'I'll be burned if they ain't growed while we bin sittin' there,' Ma Hawkins said. She stared down the rows of beet, weed-choked, and prepared to attack them with a sort of despairing savagery. 'That's come out hot, too. I can feel it burn the seat o' me breeches.'

'You go hot and cold quick for an old 'un,' Liz Borden said.

One by one the women stood waiting with their hoes, until at last Poll Sankey, lying on the bank with the baby on her chest, remained the only one not ready.

'Ain't you comin', Poll?' they said. 'Be tea-time afore we know where we are.'

'One more minute with my man,' Poll said. 'My beauty.'

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‘I’ll put him in his pram and sit him up,’ Pauline said, ‘and then he can watch us coming up the rows.’

Poll Sankey held the baby for a few seconds longer, dancing him against her breast and then against the sky, laughing.

‘You’ll git the child spoilt,’ Liz Borden said.

‘Ah! let’s spoil him. Who wouldn’t?’ Poll said. ‘That’s what he’s for.’

‘Give him to me now,’ his mother said.

When she had taken him up and he was sitting in his pram again the women began at last to hoe down the rows of beet, in light wind and sun, towards the hollow of flax that waved like water. Clouds rose like pure white smoke over the sweet-chestnuts, casting brushes of running shadow. In the clear air there was a sound of hoes beaten on stone and earth and from beyond the hazel-wood the sweep of a hay-turner in another field.

And sometimes the child would lift his voice in the afternoon, crowing at the summer air. And as they heard it the women would stop in their hoeing and laugh, and Poll Sankey would stop and laugh louder than the rest, with her voice that was like a trumpet, and wave her hand.

‘There’s my man!’ she would say. ‘You can hear him from here! There’s my man – my beauty!’

Where the Cloud Breaks

COLONEL GRACIE, who had decided to boil himself two new-laid eggs for lunch, came into the kitchen from the garden and laid his panama hat on top of the stove, put the eggs into it, and then, after some moments of blissful concentration, looked inside to see if they were cooking.

Presently he sensed that something was vaguely wrong about all this and began to search for a saucepan. Having found it, a small blue enamel one much blackened by fire, he gazed at it with intent inquiry for some moments, half made a gesture as if to put it on his head and then decided to drop the eggs into it, without benefit of water. In the course of doing this he twice dipped the sleeve of his white duck jacket into a dish of raspberry jam, originally put out on the kitchen table for breakfast. The jam dish was in fact a candlestick, in pewter, the candle part of which had broken away.

Soon the Colonel, in the process of making himself some toast, found himself wondering what day it was. He couldn't be sure. He had recently given up taking *The Times* and it was this that made things difficult. He knew the month was July, although the calendar hanging by the side of the stove actually said it was September, but that of course didn't help much about the day. He guessed it might be Tuesday; but you never really knew when you lived alone. Still, it helped sometimes to know whether it was Tuesday or Sunday, just in case he ran short of tobacco

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and walked all the way to the village shop only to find it closed.

Was it Tuesday? The days were normally fixed quite clearly in his mind by a system of coloration. Tuesday was a most distinct shade of raspberry rose. Thursday was brown and Sunday a pleasant yellow, that particularly bright gold you got in sunflowers. Today seemed, he thought, rather a dark green, much more like a Wednesday. It was most important to differentiate, because if it were really Wednesday it would be not the slightest use his walking down to the shop to get stamps after lunch, since Wednesday was early closing day.

There was nothing for it, he told himself, but to semaphore his friend Miss Wilkinson. With a piece of toast in his hand he set about finding his signalling flags, which he always kept in a cupboard under the stairs. As he stooped to unlatch the cupboard door a skein of onions left over from the previous winter dropped from a fragile string on the wall and fell on his neck without alarming him visibly.

One of the flags was bright yellow, the other an agreeable shade of chicory blue. Experience had shown that these two colours showed up far better than all others against the surrounding landscape of lush chestnut copse and woodland. They were clearly visible for a good half mile.

In the army, from which he was now long retired, signalling had been the Colonel's special pigeon. He had helped to train a considerable number of men with extreme proficiency. Miss Wilkinson, who was sixty, wasn't of course quite so apt a pupil as a soldier in his prime, but she had nevertheless been overjoyed to learn what was not

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altogether a difficult art. It had been the greatest fun for them both; it had whiled away an enormous number of lonely hours.

For the past five weeks Miss Wilkinson had been away, staying on the south coast with a sister, and the Colonel had missed her greatly. Not only had there been no one to whom he could signal his questions, doubts, and thoughts; he had never really been quite sure, all that time, what day it was.

After now having had the remarkable presence of mind to put an inch or two of water into the egg saucepan the Colonel set out with the flags to walk to the bottom of the garden, which sloped fairly gently to its southern boundary, a three-foot hedge of hawthorn. Along the hedge thirty or forty gigantic heads of sunflower were in full flower, the huge faces staring like yellow guardians across the three sloping open meadows that lay between the Colonel and Miss Wilkinson, who lived in a small white weatherboard house down on the edge of a narrow stream. Sometimes after torrential winter rains the little stream rose with devastating rapidity, flooding Miss Wilkinson, so that the Colonel had to be there at the double, to bale her out.

In the centre of the hedge was a stile and the Colonel, who in his crumpled suit of white duck looked something like a cadaverous baker out of work, now stood up on it and blew three sharp blasts on a whistle. This was the signal to fetch Miss Wilkinson from the kitchen, the greenhouse, the potting shed, or wherever she happened to be. The system of whistle and flag suited both the Colonel and Miss Wilkinson admirably, the Colonel because he hated

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the telephone so much and Miss Wilkinson because she couldn't afford to have the instrument installed. For the same reasons neither of them owned either television or radio, the Colonel having laid it down in expressly severe terms, almost as if in holy writ, that he would not only never have such anti-social devices in the house but that they were also, in a sense, degenerate: if not immoral.

Miss Wilkinson having appeared in her garden in a large pink sun hat and a loose summery blue dress with flowers all over it, the Colonel addressed her by smartly raising his yellow flag. Miss Wilkinson replied by promptly raising her blue one. This meant that they were receiving each other loud and clear.

The day in fact was so beautifully clear that the Colonel could actually not only see Miss Wilkinson in detail as she stood on the small wooden bridge that spanned the stream but he could also pick out slender spires of purple loosestrife among the many tall reeds that lined the banks like dark green swords. Both he and Miss Wilkinson, among their many other things in common, were crazy about flowers.

Having given himself another moment to get into correct position, the Colonel presently signalled to Miss Wilkinson that he was frightfully sorry to trouble her but would she very much mind telling him what day it was?

To his infinite astonishment Miss Wilkinson signalled back that it was Thursday and, as if determined to leave no doubt about it, added that it was also August the second.

August? the Colonel replied. He was much surprised. He thought it was July.

No, no, it was August, Miss Wilkinson told him.

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Thursday the second – the day he was coming to tea.

The Colonel had spent the morning since ten o'clock in a rush of perspiring industry, cleaning out the hens. The fact that he was going to tea with Miss Wilkinson had, like the precise date and month, somehow slipped his mind.

'You hadn't forgotten, had you?'

'Oh! no, no, I hadn't forgotten. Had an awfully long morning that's all. Would you mind telling me what time it is now?'

In the clear summer air the Colonel could distinctly see the movement of Miss Wilkinson's arm as she raised it to look at her watch. He himself never wore a watch. Though altogether less pernicious than telephone, television and radio, a watch nevertheless belonged, in his estimation, to that category of inventions that one could well do without.

'Ten to four.'

Good God, the Colonel thought, now struck by the sudden realization that he hadn't had lunch yet.

'I was expecting you in about ten minutes. It's so lovely I thought we'd have tea outside. Under the willow tree.'

Admirable idea, the Colonel thought, without signalling it. What, by the way, had he done with the eggs? Were they on the boil or not? He couldn't for the life of him remember.

'Do you wish any eggs?' he asked. 'I have heaps.'

'No, thank you all the same. I have some.' It might have been a laugh or merely a bird-cry that the Colonel heard coming across the meadows. 'Don't be too long. I have a surprise for you.'

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As he hurried back to the house the Colonel wondered, in a dreamy sort of way, what kind of surprise Miss Wilkinson could possibly have for him and as he wondered he felt a sort of whisper travel across his heart. It was the sort of tremor he often experienced when he was on the way to see her or when he looked at the nape of her neck or when she spoke to him in some specially direct or unexpected sort of way. He would like to have put this feeling into words of some kind – signalling was child's play by comparison – but he was both too inarticulate and too shy to do so.

Half an hour later, after walking down through the meadows, he fully expected to see Miss Wilkinson waiting for him on the bank of the stream under the willow-tree, where the tea-table, cool with lace cloth, was already laid. But there was no sign of her there or in the greenhouse, where cucumbers were growing on humid vines, or in the kitchen.

Then, to his great surprise, he heard her voice calling him from some distance off and a moment later he saw her twenty yards or so away, paddling in the stream.

‘Just remembered I’d seen a bed of watercress yesterday and I thought how nice it would be. Beautifully cool, the water.’

As he watched her approaching, legs bare and white above emerald skim of water-weed, the Colonel again experienced the tremor that circumvented his heart like a whisper. This time it was actually touched with pain and there was nothing he could say.

‘Last year there was a bed much farther upstream. But I suppose the seeds get carried down.’

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Miss Wilkinson was fair and pink, almost cherubic, her voice jolly. A dew-lap rather like those seen in ageing dogs hung floppily down on the collar of her cream shantung dress, giving her a look of obese friendliness and charm.

‘The kettle’s on already,’ she said. ‘Sit yourself down while I go in and get my feet dried.’

The Colonel, watching her white feet half-running, half-trotting across the lawn, thought again of the surprise she had in store for him and wondered if paddling in the stream was it. No other, he thought, could have had a sharper effect on him.

When she came back, carrying a silver hot water jug and teapot, she laughed quite gaily in reply to his query about the surprise. No: it wasn’t paddling in the stream. And she was afraid he would have to wait until after tea before she could tell him, anyway.

‘Oh! how stupid of me,’ she said, abruptly pausing in the act of pouring tea, ‘I’ve gone and forgotten the watercress.’

‘I’ll get it, I’ll get it,’ the Colonel said, at once leaping up to go to the house.

‘Oh! no, you don’t,’ she said. ‘Not on your life. My surprise is in there.’

Later, drinking tea and munching brown bread and butter and cool sprigs of watercress dipped in salt, the Colonel found it impossible to dwell on the question of the surprise without uneasiness. In an effort to take his mind off the subject he remarked on how good the sun-flowers were this year and what a fine crop of seeds there would be. He fed them to the hens.

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'I think it's the sunflowers that give the eggs that deep brown colour,' he said.

'You do?' she said. 'By the way did you like the pie I made for you?'

'Pie?'

With silent distress the Colonel recalled a pie of morello cherries, baked and bestowed on him the day before yesterday. He had put it into the larder and had forgotten that too.

'It was delicious. I'm saving half of it for supper.'

Miss Wilkinson, looking at him rather as dogs sometimes look, head sideways, with a meditative glint in her eye, asked suddenly what he had had for lunch. Not eggs again?

The Colonel shyly confessed it had been eggs.

'I've told you before. You can't live on eggs all the time,' she said. 'I've been making pork brawn this morning. Would you care for some of that?'

'Yes, I would. Thank you. I would indeed.'

From these trivial discussions on food it seemed to the Colonel that a curious and elusive sense of intimacy sprang up. It was difficult to define but it was almost as if either he or Miss Wilkinson had proposed to each other and had been, in spirit at least, accepted.

This made him so uneasy again that he suddenly said:

'By the way, I don't think I told you. I've given up *The Times*.'

'Oh! really. Isn't that rather rash?'

'I don't think so. I'd been considering it for some time actually. You see, one is so busy with the hens and the garden and all that sort of thing that quite often one gets

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no time to read until ten o'clock. Which is absurd. I thought that from time to time I might perhaps borrow yours.'

'Of course.'

The Colonel, thinking that perhaps he was talking too much, sat silent. How pretty the stream looked, he thought. The purple loosestrife had such dignity by the waterside. He must go fishing again one day. The stream held a few trout and in the deeper pools there were chub.

'Are you quite sure you won't feel lost without a paper? I think I should.'

'No, no. I don't think so. One gets surfeited anyway with these wretched conferences and ministerial comings and goings and world tension and so on. One wants to be away from it all.'

'One mustn't run away from life, nevertheless.'

Life was what you made it, the Colonel pointed out. He preferred it as much as possible untrammelled.

Accepting Miss Wilkinson's offer of a third cup of tea and another plate of the delicious watercress he suddenly realized that he was ravenously hungry. There was a round plum cake on the table and his eye kept wandering back to it with the poignant voracity of a boy after a game of football. After a time Miss Wilkinson noticed this and started to cut the cake in readiness.

'I'm thinking of going fishing again very soon,' the Colonel said. 'If I bag a trout or two perhaps you might care to join me for supper.'

'I should absolutely love to.'

It was remarks of such direct intimacy, delivered in a moist, jolly voice, that had the Colonel's heart in its

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curious whispering state again. In silence he contemplated the almost too pleasant prospect of having Miss Wilkinson to supper. He would try his best to cook the trout nicely, in butter, and not burn them. Perhaps he would also be able to manage a glass of wine.

'I have a beautiful white delphinium in bloom,' Miss Wilkinson said. 'I want to show it you after tea.'

'That isn't the surprise?'

Miss Wilkinson laughed with almost incautious jollity.

'You must forget all about the surprise. You're like a small boy who can't wait for Christmas.'

The Colonel apologized for what seemed to be impatience and then followed this with a second apology, saying he was sorry he'd forgotten to ask Miss Wilkinson if she had enjoyed the long visit to her sister.

'Oh! splendidly. It really did me the world of good. One gets sort of ham-strung by one's habits, don't you think? It's good to get away.'

To the Colonel her long absence had seemed exactly the opposite. He would like to have told her how much he had missed her. Instead something made him say:

'I picked up a dead gold-finch in the garden this morning. It had fallen among the sea kale. Its yellow wing was open on one of the grey leaves and I thought it was a flower.'

'The cat, I suppose?'

'No, no. There was no sign of violence at all.'

Away downstream a dove cooed, breaking and yet deepening all the drowsiness of the summer afternoon. What did one want with world affairs, presidential speeches, threats of war and all those things? the Colonel

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wondered. What had newspapers ever given to the world that could be compared with that one sound, the solo voice of the dove by the waterside?

‘No, no. No more tea, thank you. Perhaps another piece of cake, yes. That’s excellent, thank you.’

The last crumb of cake having been consumed, the Colonel followed Miss Wilkinson into the flower garden to look at the white delphinium. Its snowy grace filled him with an almost ethereal sense of calm. He couldn’t have been, he thought, more happy.

‘Very beautiful. Most beautiful.’

‘I’m going to divide it in the spring,’ Miss Wilkinson said, ‘and give you a piece.’

After a single murmur of acceptance for this blessing the Colonel remained for some moments speechless, another tremor travelling round his heart, this time like the quivering of a tightened wire.

‘Well now,’ Miss Wilkinson said, ‘I think I might let you see the surprise if you’re ready.’

He was not only ready but even eager, the Colonel thought.

‘I’ll lead the way,’ Miss Wilkinson said.

She led the way into the sitting room, which was beautifully cool and full of the scent of small red carnations. The Colonel, who was not even conscious of being a hopelessly untidy person himself, nevertheless was always struck by the pervading neatness, the laundered freshness, of all parts of Miss Wilkinson’s house. It was like a little chintz holy-of-holies, always embalmed, always the same.

‘Well, what do you say. There it is.’

The Colonel, with customary blissful absent-minded-

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ness, stared about the room, without being able to note that anything had changed since his last visit there.

‘I must say I don’t really see anything in the nature of a surprise.’

‘Oh! you do. Don’t be silly.’

No, the Colonel had to confess, there was nothing he could see. It was all exactly as he had seen it the last time.

‘Over there. In the corner. Of course it’s rather a small one. Not as big as my sister’s.’

It slowly began to reach the blissfully preoccupied cloisters of the Colonel’s mind that he was gazing at a television set. A cramping chill went round his heart. For a few unblissful moments he stared hard in front of him, tormented by a sense of being unfairly trapped, with nothing to say.

‘My sister gave it to me. She’s just bought herself a new one. You see you get so little allowed for an old one in part exchange that it’s hardly worth –’

‘You mean you’ve actually got it permanently?’

‘Why, yes. Of course.’

The Colonel found himself speaking with a voice so constricted that it seemed almost to be disembodied.

‘But I always thought you hated those things.’

‘Well, I suppose there comes a day. I must say it was a bit of a revelation at my sister’s. Some of the things one saw were absorbing. For instance there was a programme about a remote Indian tribe in the forests of South America that I found quite marvellous.’ The Colonel was stiff, remote-eyed, as if not listening. ‘This tribe was in complete decay. It was actually dying out, corrupted –’

‘Corrupted by what? By civilization my guess would be.’

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'As a matter of fact they were. For one thing they die like flies from measles.'

'Naturally. That,' the Colonel said, 'is what I am always trying to say.'

'Yes, but there are other viewpoints. One comes to realize that.'

'The parallel seems to me to be an exact one,' the Colonel said.

'I'm afraid I can't agree.'

There was now a certain chill, almost an iciness, in the air. The ethereal calm of the afternoon, its emblem the white delphinium, seemed splintered and blackened. The Colonel, though feeling that Miss Wilkinson had acted in some way like a traitor, at the same time had no way of saying so. It was all so callous, he thought, so shockingly out of character. He managed to blurt out:

'I really didn't think you'd come down to this.'

'I didn't come down to it, as you so candidly put it. It was simply a gift from my sister. You talk about it as if I'd started taking some sort of horrible drug.'

'In a sense you have.'

'I'm afraid I disagree again.'

'All these things are drugs. Cinemas, radio, television, telephone, even newspapers. That's really why I've given up *The Times*. I thought we always agreed on that?'

'We may have done. At one time. Now we'll have to agree to differ.'

'Very well.'

A hard lump rose in the Colonel's throat and stuck there. A miserable sense of impotence seized him and kept him stiff, with nothing more to say.

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'I might have shown you a few minutes of it and converted you,' Miss Wilkinson said. 'But the aerial isn't up yet. It's coming this evening.'

'I don't think I want to be converted, thank you.'

'I hoped you'd like it and perhaps come down in the evenings sometimes and watch.'

'Thank you, I shall be perfectly happy in my own way.'

'Very well. I'm sorry you're so stubborn about it.'

The Colonel was about to say with acidity that he was not stubborn and then changed his mind and said curtly that he must go. After a painful silence Miss Wilkinson said:

'Well, if you must I'll get the pork brawn.'

'I don't think I care for the pork brawn, thank you.'

'Just as you like.'

At the door of the sitting room the Colonel paused, if anything stiffer than ever, and remarked that if there was something he particularly wanted he would signal her.

'I shan't be answering any signals,' Miss Wilkinson said.

'You won't be answering any signals?'

An agony of disbelief went twisting through the Colonel, imposing on him a momentary paralysis. He could only stare.

'No: I shan't be answering any signals.'

'Does that mean you won't be speaking to me again?'

'I didn't say that.'

'I think it rather sounds like that.'

'Then you must go on thinking it sounds like that, that's all.'

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It was exactly as if Miss Wilkinson had slapped him harshly in the face; it was precisely as if he had proposed and been rudely rejected.

‘Good-bye,’ he said in a cold and impotent voice.

‘Good-bye,’ she said. ‘I’ll see you out.’

‘There’s no need to see me out, thank you. I’ll find my way alone.’

Back in his own kitchen the Colonel discovered that the eggs had boiled black in the saucepan. He had forgotten to close the door of the stove. Brown smoke was hanging everywhere. Trying absent-mindedly to clear up the mess he twice put his sleeve in the jam dish without noticing it and then wiped his sleeve across the tablecloth, uncleared since breakfast-time.

In the garden the dead gold-finch still lay on the silvery leaf of sea-kale and he stood staring at it for a long time, stiff-eyed and impotent, unable to think one coherent simple thought.

Finally he went back to the house, took out the signalling flags and went over to the stile. Standing on it, he gave three difficult blasts on the whistle but nothing happened in answer except that one of two men standing on the roof of Miss Wilkinson’s house, erecting the television aerial, casually turned his head.

Then he decided to send a signal. The three words he wanted so much to send were ‘Please forgive me’ but after some moments of contemplation he found that he had neither the heart nor the will to raise a flag.

Instead he simply stood immovable by the stile, staring across the meadows in the evening sun. His eyes were blank. They seemed to be groping in immeasurable appeal

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for something and as if in answer to it the long row of great yellow sunflower faces, the seeds of which were so excellent for the hens, stared back at him, in that wide laughing, almost mocking way that sunflowers have.

Mrs Eglantine

EVERY morning Mrs Eglantine sat at the round bamboo bar of the New Pacific Hotel and drank her breakfast. This consisted of two quick large brandies, followed by several slower ones. By noon breakfast had become lunch and by two o'clock the pouches under and above Mrs Eglantine's bleared blue eyes began to look like large puffed pink prawns.

'I suppose you know you've got her name wrong?' my friend the doctor said to me. 'It's really Eglinton. What makes you call her Eglantine?'

'She must have been rather sweet at some time.'

'You think so?' he said. 'What has Eglantine got to do with that?'

'The Sweet-briar,' I said, 'or the Vine, or the twisted Eglantine.'

For a woman of nearly fifty Mrs Eglantine wore her blue linen shorts very neatly. Her legs were brown, well-shaped, and spare. Her arms were slim and hairless and her nails well-manicured. She had pretty delicate ears and very soft pale blue eyes. Her hair, though several shades too yellow, was smooth and always well-brushed, with a slight upward curl where it fell on her tanned slender shoulders.

Her only habit of untidiness was that sometimes, as she sat at the bar, she let one or both of her yellow sandals fall off. After that she often staggered about the veranda with

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one shoe on and one in her hand; or with both shoes off, carrying them and saying:

‘Whose bloody shoes are these? Anybody know whose bloody shoes these are?’

Soon, when she got to know me a little better, she would slap one of her sandals on the seat of the bar-stool next to her and say:

‘Here, England, come and sit here.’ She always called me England. ‘Come and sit down and talk to me. I’m British too. Come and sit down. Nice to meet someone from the old country in this lousy frog-crowd. What do you make of Tahiti?’

I had never time to tell her what I thought of Tahiti before, licking brandy from her lips, she would say something like:

‘Swindle. The big myth. The great South-sea bubble. The great South-sea paradise. Not a decent hotel in the place. All the shops owned by Chinks. Everybody bone-lazy. Takes you all day to cash a cheque at the bank. Hot and dirty. Still, what else do you expect with the Froggies running the show?’

Presently, after another brandy or two, she would begin to call me dear.

‘You’ve seen the travel posters, haven’t you, dear? Those nice white sands and all the Polynesian girls with naked bosoms climbing the palms? All a myth, dear. All a bloody swindle. All taken in the Cook Islands, hundreds of miles away.’

Talking of the swindle of white sands and Polynesian girls she would point with her well-kept hands to the shore:

'Look at the beach, dear. Just look at it. I ask you. Black sand, millions of sea-eggs, thousands of those liverish-looking sea-snakes. Coral island, my foot. I can bear most things, England, but not black sand. Not a beach that looks like a foundry yard.'

It was true that the beaches of Tahiti were black, that the sea, where shallow, was thick with sea-eggs and at low tide with creatures looking like inert lumps of yellow intestine. But there were also shoals of blue and yellow fish, like delicate underwater sails, with sometimes a flying fish or a crowd of exquisite blue torpedoes flashing in bluest water.

It occurred to me that something, perhaps, had made her ignore these things.

'How long have you been here now?' I said.

'Ever been to Australia?' she said. 'That's the place for beaches. Miles of them. Endless. You've seen the Cook Islands? White as that. Me? Six months, dear. Nearly seven months now.'

'Why don't you take the sea-plane and get out,' I said, 'if you hate it so much?'

'Long story, England,' she said. 'Bloody complicated.'

Every afternoon she staggered away, slept in her room and reappeared about six, in time for sunset. By that time she had changed her shorts for a dress, generally something very simple in cotton or silk that, from a distance or behind, with her brief lean figure, made her look attractive, fresh, and quite young.

I noticed that, in the evening, she did not go at once to the bar. For perhaps ten minutes or a quarter of an hour

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she would stand in silence at the rail of the veranda, gazing at the sunset.

The sunsets across the lagoon at Tahiti, looking towards the great chimneys of Moorea, are the most beautiful in the world. As the sun dips across the Pacific the entire sky behind the mountains opens up like a blast furnace, flaming pure and violent fire. Over the upper sky roll clouds of scarlet petal, then orange, then yellow, then pink, and then swan-white as they sail away, high, and slowly, over the ocean to the north. In the last minutes before darkness there is left only a thunderous purple map of smouldering ash across the sky.

‘It’s so beautiful, England, dear,’ she said to me. ‘God, it’s so beautiful it takes your breath away. I always want to cry.’

Once or twice she actually did cry but soon, when sunset was over and the enormous soft southern stars were breaking the deep black sky, she would be back to brandy and the bar. Once again her eyes would take on the appearance of swollen prawns. One by one her shoes would fall off, leaving her to grope bare-footed, carrying her shoes about the veranda, not knowing whose they were.

‘Sweet people,’ she said once. ‘Very sweet people, you and Mrs England. Good old England. That’s a sweet dress she has on. What would you say, Mrs England, if you wanted to marry someone here and they wouldn’t let you?’

She laughed. From much brandy her skin was hot and baggy. Her eyes, looking as if they were still in tears from the sunset, could no longer focus themselves.

‘A Froggy too,’ she said, ‘which I call damn funny. Rather a nice Froggy too.’

Her voice was thick and bitter.

'Rather funny,' she said. 'I come all this way from Australia to meet him here and then find they've sent him to New Caledonia. Administrative post. Administrative trick dear, see?'

I said something about how simple it was, nowadays, to fly from one side of the Pacific to the other, and she said:

'Can't get permission, dear. Got to get permission from the Froggies to go to Froggy territory,' she went on. 'Of course he'll come back here in time.'

I said something about how simple it was to wait here, in Tahiti, where she was, and she said:

'Can't get permission, dear. Got to get permission from the Froggies to stay in Froggy territory. Froggy red tape, dear. Can't stay here, can't go there. Next week my permit expires.'

I made some expression of sympathy about all this and she said:

'All a trick, dear. Complete wangle. His father's a friend of the governor. Father doesn't like me. Governor doesn't like me. Undesirable type, dear. Divorced and drinks too much. Bad combination. British too. They don't want the British here. Leaves more Tahitian girls for the Froggies to set up fancy house with.'

There were, as my friend the doctor said, only two general types in Tahiti: those who took one look at the island, wanted to depart next day and never set eyes on it again; and those who, from the first moment, wanted to stay there for ever. Now I had met a third.

'Going to make my last appeal for an extension of my

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permit tomorrow,' Mrs Eglantine said. 'Suppose you wouldn't like to write it for me, would you, England dear? It'll need to be bloody well put, that's sure.'

'Where will you go?' I said. 'If you have to go?'

'Nearest British possession, dear. Cook Islands. Wait there.'

The Cook Islands are very beautiful. Across a long, shallow, sharkless lagoon flying-boats glide down between soft fringes of palm and purest hot white coral sand. At the little resthouse, by the anchorage, the prettiest and friendliest of Polynesian girls serve tea and cakes, giggling constantly, shaking back their long loose black hair.

'Yes, it's very lovely,' I said. 'You couldn't have a better place to go than that. That's a paradise.'

'And a dry one,' she said, 'in case you didn't know it. Worse than prohibition. They allow you a bottle of something stronger than lime-juice once a month, dear, and you even need a permit for that.'

We left her under the moth-charged lights of the veranda groping for her shoes.

'*Dormez bien*, dears,' she said. 'Which is more than I shall do.'

'She must have been very pretty once,' my wife said.

'She's pretty now,' I said, 'sweet and rather pretty.'

Five-days later she flew out with us on the morning plane. Half-way to the Cook Islands I brought her breakfast and she said, as she knocked it back, 'Bless you, England dear.'

In the lagoon, by the anchorage, a little crowd of Polynesians, mostly women and girls, sat under the shade of palm-trees, out of the pure blistering heat of white coral

MRS EGLANTINE

sand, singing songs of farewell to a young man leaving by the plane.

The songs of Polynesia have a great sadness in them that is very haunting. A few of the women were weeping. Then at the last moment a girl rushed on bare feet along the jetty towards the waiting launch, wringing her hands in sorrow, her long hair flying, bitterly weeping final words of good-bye.

On the scalding white coral beach, under the palms, Mrs Eglantine was nowhere to be seen. And presently, as the launch moved away, I could no longer hear the songs of sad farewell or the haunting voice of the girl who was weeping. But only, running through my head, haunting too:

‘The Sweet-briar, or the Vine, or the twisted Eglantine.’

Thelma

THE place where she was born was eighty miles from London. She was never to go to London in all her life except in dreams or in imagination, when she lay awake in the top bedroom of the hotel, listening to the sound of wind in the forest boughs.

When she first began to work at The Blenheim Arms she was a plump short girl of fourteen, with remarkably pale cream hands and a head of startling hair exactly the colour of autumn beech leaves. Her eyes seemed bleached and languid. The only colour in their lashes was an occasional touch of gold that made them look like curled paint brushes that were not quite dry.

She began first as a bedroom maid, living in and starting at five in the morning and later taking up brass cans of hot shaving water to the bedrooms of gentlemen who stayed overnight. These gentlemen – any guest was called a gentleman in those days – were mostly commercial travellers going regularly from London to the West country or back again and after a time she got to know them very well. After a time she also got to know the view from the upper bedroom windows very well: southward to the village, down the long wide street of brown-red houses where horses in those days were still tied to hitching posts and then westward and northward and eastward to the forest that sheltered the houses like a great horseshoe of boughs and leaves. She supposed there were a million

beech-trees in that forest. She did not know. She only knew, because people said so, that you could walk all day through it and never come to the other side.

At first she was too shy and too quiet about her work in the bedrooms. She knocked on early morning doors too softly. Heavy sleepers could not be woken by the tap of her small soft hands, and cans of hot water grew cold on landings while other fuming frowsy men lay awake, waiting for their calls. This early mistake was almost the only one she ever made. The hotel was very old, with several long back staircases and complicated narrow passages and still more flights of stairs up which she had to lug, every morning to attic bedrooms, twenty cans of water. She soon learned that it was stupid to lug more than she need. After two mornings she learned to hammer hard with her fist on the doors of bedrooms and after less than a week she was knocking, walking in, putting the can of hot water on the wash-stand, covering it with a towel and saying in a soft firm young voice:

‘Half past six, sir. You’ve got just an hour before your train.’

In this way she grew used to men. It was her work to go into bedrooms where men were frequently to be startled in strange attitudes, half-dressed, unshaved, stupid with sleep, and sometimes thick-tongued and groping. It was no use being shy about it. It was no use worrying about it either. She herself was never thick-tongued, stupid, or groping in the mornings, and after a time she found she had no patience with men who had to be called a second time and then complained that their shaving water was cold. Already she was speaking to them as if she were an

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older person, slightly peremptory but not unkind, a little vexed but always understanding:

‘Of course the water’s cold, sir. You should get up when you’re called. I called you twice. Do you expect people to call you fifty times?’

Her voice was slow and soft. The final syllables of her sentences went singing upward on a gentle and inquiring scale. It was perhaps because of this that men were never offended by what she had to say to them even as a young girl and that they never took exception to remarks that would have been impertinent or forward in other girls.

‘I know, Thelma,’ they would say. ‘That’s me all over Thelma. Never could get the dust out of my eyes. I’ll be down in five shakes – four and half minutes for the eggs, Thelma. I like them hard.’

Soon she began to know not only the names of travelers but exactly when they had to be called, what trains they had to catch, and how they liked their eggs boiled. She knew those who liked two cans of shaving water and a wad of cotton wool because they always cut themselves. She was ready for those who groped to morning life with yellow eyes:

‘Well, you won’t be told, sir. You know how it takes you. You take more than you can hold and then you wonder why you feel like death the morning after.’

‘I know, Thelma, I know. What was I drinking?’

‘Cider most of the time and you had three rum and ports with Mr Henderson.’

‘Rum and port! – Oh! my lord, Thelma –’

‘That’s what I say – you never learn. People can tell you forty times, can’t they, but you never learn.’

THELMA

Once a month, on Sunday, when she finished work at three o'clock, she walked in the forest. She was very fond of the forest. She still believed it was true, as people said, that you could walk through it all day and never come to the farther side of it but she did not mind about that. She was quite content to walk some distance into it and, if the days were fine and warm, sit down and look at the round grey trunks of the countless shimmering beeches. They reminded her very much of the huge iron-coloured legs of a troupe of elephants she had once seen at a circus and the trees themselves had just the same friendly sober air.

When she was eighteen a man named George Furness, a traveller in fancy goods and cheap lines of cutlery, came to stay at the hotel for a Saturday night and a Sunday. She did not know quite how it came about but it presently turned out in the course of casual conversation that Furness was quite unable to believe that the nuts that grew on beech-trees were just as eatable as the nuts that grew on hazel or walnut trees. It was a silly, stupid thing, she thought, for a grown man to have to admit that he didn't know about beech-nuts.

'Don't kid me,' Furness said. 'They're no more good to eat than acorns.'

For the first time, in her country way, she found herself being annoyed and scornful with someone who doubted the truth of her words.

'If you don't believe me,' she said, 'come with me and we'll get some. The forest is full enough of them. Come with me and I'll show you - I'll be going there tomorrow.'

The following day, Sunday, she walked with Furness in

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the forest, through the great rides of scalded brilliant beeches. In the October sunshine her hair shone in a big coppery bun from under the back of her green straw Sunday hat. Furness was a handsome, light-hearted man of thirty-five with thickish lips and dark oiled hair and a short yellow cane which he occasionally swished, sword-fashion, at pale clouds of dancing flies. These flies, almost transparent in the clear October sun, were as light and delicate as the lashes of Thelma's fair bleached eyes.

For some time she and Furness sat on a fallen tree-trunk while she picked up beech-nuts, shelled them for him, and watched him eat them. She did not feel any particular sense of triumph in having shown a man that beech-nuts were good to eat but she laughed once or twice, quite happily, as Furness threw them gaily into the air, caught them deftly in his mouth and said how good they were. His tongue was remarkably red as it stiffened and flicked at the nuts and she noticed it every time. What was also remarkable was that Furness did not peel a single nut himself. With open outstretched hand and poised red tongue he simply sat and waited to be fed.

'You mean you really didn't know they were good?' she said.

'To tell you the honest,' Furness said, 'I never saw a beech-tree in my life before.'

'Oh! go on with you,' she said. '*Never?*'

'No,' he said. 'Honest. Cut my throat. I wouldn't know one if I saw one anyway.'

'Aren't there trees in London?'

'Oh! plenty,' Furness said. 'Trees all over the place.'

'As many as this?' she said. 'As many as in the forest?'

'Oh! easy,' Furness said, 'only more scattered. Scattered about in big parks – Richmond, Kew, Hyde Park, places like that – miles and miles. Scattered.'

'I like to hear you talk about London.'

'You must come up there some time,' he said. 'I'll show you round a bit. We'll have a day on the spree.'

He laughed again in his gay fashion and suddenly, really before she knew what was happening, he put his arms round her and began to kiss her. It was the first time she had ever been kissed by anyone in that sort of way and the lips of George Furness were pleasantly moist and warm. He kissed her several times again and presently they were lying on the thick floor of beech-leaves together. She felt a slight crackle of leaves under her hair as George Furness pressed against her, kissing her throat, and then suddenly she felt afraid of something and she sat up, brushing leaves from her hair and shoulders.

'I think we ought to go now,' she said.

'Oh no,' he said. 'Come on. What's the hurry, what's the worry? Come on, Thelma, let's have some fun.'

'Not here. Not today –'

'Here today, gone tomorrow,' Furness said. 'Come on, Thelma, let's make a little hay while the sun shines.'

Suddenly, because Furness himself was so gay and light-hearted about everything, she felt that perhaps she was being over-cautious and stupid and something made her say:

'Perhaps some other day. When are you coming back again?'

'Well, that's a point,' he said. 'If I go to Bristol first I'll be back this way Friday. If I go to Hereford first I'll stay

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in Bristol over the week-end and be back here Monday.'

Sunlight breaking through thinning autumn branches scattered dancing blobs of gold on his face and hands as he laughed again and said:

'All right, Thelma? A little hay-making when I come back?'

'We'll see.'

'Is that a promise?'

'We'll see.'

'I'll take it as a promise,' he said. He laughed again and kissed her neck and she felt excited. 'You can keep a promise, Thelma, can't you?'

'Never mind about that now,' she said. 'What time shall I call you in the morning?'

'Call me early, mother dear,' he said. 'I ought to be away by six or just after.'

She could not sleep that night. She thought over and over again of the way George Furness had kissed her. She remembered the moist warm lips, the red gay tongue flicking at beech-nuts, and how sunlight breaking through thinning autumn branches had given a dancing effect to his already light-hearted face and hands. She remembered the way he had talked of promises and making hay. And after a time she could not help wishing that she had done what George Furness had wanted her to do. 'But there's always next week-end,' she thought. 'I'll be waiting next week-end.'

It was very late when she fell asleep and it was after half past six before she woke again. It was a quarter to seven before she had the tea made and when she hurried upstairs with the tray her hands were trembling. Then

THELMA

after she had knocked on the door of George Furness's bedroom she went inside to make the first of several discoveries. The bed was empty and George Furness had left by motor-car.

Only a few years later, by the time she was twenty-five, almost every gentleman came and went by motor-car. But that morning it was a new and strange experience to know that a gentleman did not need to go by train. It was a revolution in her life that a man could pay his bill overnight, leave before breakfast, and not wait for his usual can of shaving water.

All that week, and for several weeks afterwards, she waited for George Furness to come back. She waited with particular anxiety on Fridays and Mondays. She found herself becoming agitated at the sound of a motor-car. Then for the few remaining Sundays of that autumn she walked in the forest, sat down in the exact spot where George Furness had thrown beech-nuts into the air and caught them in his red fleshy mouth, and tried intensely to re-experience what it was like to be kissed by that mouth, in late warm sunlight, under a million withering beech-leaves.

All this time, and for some time afterwards, she went about her work as if nothing had happened. Then presently she began to inquire, casually at first, as if it was really a trivial matter, whether anyone had seen George Furness. When it appeared that nobody had and again that nobody even knew what Furness looked like she found herself beginning to describe him, explain him, and exaggerate him a little more. In that way, by making him a little larger than life, she felt that people would recognize

him more readily. Presently there would inevitably come a day when someone would say 'Ah! yes, old George. Ran across him only yesterday.'

At the same time she remained secretive and shy about him. She did not mention him in open company. It was always to some gentleman alone, to a solitary commercial traveller sipping a late night whisky or an early morning cup of tea in his bedroom, that she would say:

'Ever see George Furness nowadays? He hasn't been down lately. You knew him didn't you?'

'Can't say I did.'

'Nice cheerful fellow. Dark. Came from London - he'd talk to you hours about London, George would. Used to keep me fascinated. I think he was in quite a way up there.'

And soon, occasionally, she began to go further than this:

'Oh! we had some times, George and me. He liked a bit of fun, George did. I used to show him the forest sometimes. He didn't know one tree from another.'

One hot Sunday afternoon in early summer, when she was twenty, she was walking towards the forest when she met another commercial traveller, a man in hosiery named Prentis, sauntering with boredom along the roadside, flicking at the heads of buttercups with a thin malacca cane. His black patent leather shoes were white with dust and something about the way he flicked at the buttercups reminded her of the way George Furness had cut with his cane at dancing clouds of late October flies.

'Sunday,' Prentis said. 'Whoever invented Sunday? Not a commercial, you bet. If there's one day in the week I hate it's Sunday - what's there to do on Sundays?'

'I generally walk in the forest,' she said.

Some time later, in the forest, Prentis began kissing her very much as George Furness had done. Under the thick bright mass of leaves, motionless in the heat of afternoon, she shut her eyes and tried to persuade herself that the moist red lips of Furness were pressing down on hers. The recaptured sensation of warmth and softness excited her into trembling. Then suddenly, feeling exposed and shy in the open riding, she was afraid that perhaps someone from the hotel might walk past and see her and she said:

'Let's take the little path there. That's a nice way. Nobody ever goes up there.'

Afterwards Prentis took off his jacket and made a pillow of it and they lay down together for the rest of the afternoon in the thick cool shade. At the same time Prentis's feet itched and he took off his shoes. As he did so and she saw the shoes white with summer dust she said:

'You'd better leave them with me tonight. I'll clean them nicely.'

And then presently, lying on her back, looking up at the high bright mass of summer leaves with her bleached far-off eyes, she said:

'Do you like the forest? Ever been in here before?'

'Never.'

'I love it here,' she said. 'I always come when I can.'

'By yourself?'

'That would be telling,' she said.

'I'll bet you do,' he said. He began laughing, pressing his body against her, stringing his fingers like a comb through her sharp red hair. 'Every Sunday, eh? What time will you bring the shoes?'

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Presently he kissed her again. And again she shut her eyes and tried to imagine that the mouth pressing down on hers was the mouth of George Furness. The experience was like that of trying to stalk a butterfly on the petal of a flower and seeing it, at the last moment, flutter away at the approach of a shadow. It was very pleasant kissing Prentis under the great arch of beech-leaves in the hot still afternoon. She liked it very much. But what she sought, in the end, was not quite there.

By the time she was twenty-five she had lost count of the number of men she had taken into the forest on Sunday afternoons. By then her face had broadened and begun to fill out a lot. Her arms were fleshy and her hips had begun to stand out from her body so that her skirts were always a little too tight and rode up at the back, showing the hem of her underclothes. Her feet, from walking up and down stairs all day, had grown much flatter and her legs were straight and solid. In the summer she could not bear to wear her corsets and gradually her figure became more floppy, her bust like a soft fat pillow untidily slept in.

Most of the men who came to spend a night or two at the hotel were married men, travellers glad of a little relieve from wives and then equally glad, after a week or two on the road, to go back to them again. She was a great comfort to such men. They looked forward through dreary days of lugging and unpacking sample cases to evenings when Thelma, pillowy and soft, with her soothing voice, would put her head into their bedrooms and say:

‘Had a good week, sir? Anything you want? Something you’d like me to get for you?’

THELMA

Many of them wanted Thelma. Almost as many of them were content simply to talk with her. At night, when she took up to their bedrooms hot jugs of cocoa, tots of whisky, pots of tea or, in winter, for colds, fiery mugs of steaming rum and cinnamon, they liked her to stay and talk for a while. Sometimes she simply stood by the bedside, arms folded over her enlarging bosom, legs a little apart, nodding and listening. Sometimes she sat on the edge of the bed, her skirt riding up over her thick knees, her red hair like a plaited bell-rope as one of the travellers twisted it in his hands. Sometimes a man was in trouble: a girl had thrown him over or a wife had died. Then she listened with eyes that seemed so intent in their wide and placid colourlessness that again and again a man troubled in loneliness gained the impression that she was thinking always and only of him. Not one of them guessed that she was really thinking of George Furness or that as she let them twist her thick red hair, stroke her pale comforting, comfortable arms and thighs, or kiss her unaggressive lips she was really letting someone else, in imagination, do these things. In the same way when she took off her clothes and slipped into bed with them it was from feelings and motives far removed from wantonness. She was simply groping hungrily for experiences she felt George Furness, and only George Furness, ought to have shared.

When she was thirty the urge to see George Furness became so obsessive that she decided, for the first and only time in her life, to go to London. She did not really think of the impossibility of finding anybody in so large a place. She had thought a great deal about London and what it would be like there, with George Furness, on the spree.

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Lying in her own room, listening to the night sounds of a forest that was hardly ever really still all through winter and summer, she had built up the impression that London, though vast, was also composed in large part of trees. That was because George Furness had described it that way. For that reason she was not afraid of London; the prospect of being alone there did not appal her. And always at the back of her mind lay the comforting and unsullied notion that somehow, by extraordinary chance, by some unbelievable miracle, she would run into George Furness there as naturally and simply as if he were walking up the steps of The Blenheim Arms.

So she packed her things into a small black fibre suitcase, asked for seven days off, the only holiday she had ever taken in her life, and started off by train. At the junction twelve miles away she had not only to change trains but she had also to wait for thirty-five minutes for the eastbound London train. It was midday on a warm oppressive day in September and she decided to go into the refreshment room to rest and get herself an Eccles cake, of which she was very fond, and a cup of tea. The cakes in fact tempted her so much that she ordered two.

Just before the cakes and the tea arrived at her table she became uneasily aware of someone looking at her. She looked round the refreshment room and saw, standing with his foot on the rail of the bar, beside a big blue-flamed tea-urn, a man she knew named Lattimore, a traveller in novelty lines for toy-shops and bazaars. Lattimore, a tallish man of thirty-five with fair receding hair and a thick gold signet ring on the third finger of his right hand, was drinking whisky from a tumbler.

She was so used to the state and appearance of men who took too much to drink that she recognized, even at that distance across the railway refreshment room, that Lattimore was not quite sober. She had seen him drunk once or twice before and instinctively she felt concerned and sorry for him as he picked up his glass, wiped his mouth on the back of his free hand, and then came over to talk to her.

‘Where are you going, Mr Lattimore?’ she said.

‘Down to the old Blenheim,’ he said. ‘Where are *you*?’

She did not say where she was going. In the few moments before her cakes arrived she looked at Lattimore with keen pale eyes. The pupils of his own eyes were dusky, ill-focused, and beginning to water.

‘What is it, Mr Lattimore?’ she said.

‘Blast and damn her,’ he said. ‘Blast her.’

‘That isn’t the way to talk,’ Thelma said.

‘Blast her,’ he said. ‘Double blast her.’

Her cakes and tea arrived. She poured herself a cup of tea.

‘A cup of this would do you more good than that stuff,’ she said.

‘Double blast,’ he said. He gulped suddenly at the glass of whisky and then took a letter from his pocket. ‘Look at that, Thelma. Tell us what you think of that.’

It was not the first time she had read a letter from a wife to a husband telling him that she was finished, fed up, and going away. Most of that sort of thing, she found, came right enough in the end. What she chiefly noticed this time was the postmark on the envelope. The letter came from London and it reminded her suddenly that she was going there.

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‘Have one of these Eccles cakes,’ she said. ‘You want to get some food inside you.’

He fumbled with an Eccles cake. Flaky crumbs of pastry and loose currants fell on his waistcoat and striped grey trousers. To her dismay he then put the Eccles cake back on the plate and, after a pause, picked up her cake in mistake for his own. Something about this groping mistake of his with the cakes made her infinitely sad for him and she said:

‘You never ought to get into a state like this, Mr Lattimore. It’s awful. You’ll do yourself no good getting into this sort of state. You’re not driving, are you?’

‘Train,’ he said. ‘Train.’ He suddenly drained his whisky and, before she could speak, wandered across the refreshment bar to get himself another. ‘Another double and what platform for Deansborough?’ he called. He banged his hand on the counter and there was a sudden ring of breaking glasses.

Ten minutes later she was sitting with him in the train for Deansborough, going back home, his head on her shoulder. It was warm and oppressive in the carriage and she opened the window and let in fresh air. The wind blowing on his face ruffled his thinning hair and several times she smoothed it down again with her hands. It came to her then that she might have been smoothing down the hair of George Furness and at the same time she remembered London, though without regret.

‘What part of London do you come from?’ she said.

‘Finchley.’

‘That isn’t near the parks is it?’ she said. ‘You don’t ever run across a man named George Furness, do you?’

THELMA

The little local train was rattling slowly and noisily between banks of woodland. Its noises rebounded from trees and cuttings and in through the open window so that for a moment she was not quite sure what Lattimore was saying in reply.

'Furness? George? Old George? - dammit, friend of mine. Lives in Maida Vale.'

She sat staring for some time at the deep September banks of woodland, still dark green from summer, streaming past the windows. The whisky breath of Lattimore was sour on the sultry air and she opened the window a little further, breathing fast and deeply.

'When did you see him last?' she said.

'Thursday - no, Wednesday,' he said. 'Play snooker together every Wednesday, me and George.'

Within a month the leaves on the beeches would be turning copper. With the blood pounding in her throat, she sat thinking of their great masses of burning, withering leaf and the way, a long time before, George Furness had held out his hand while she peeled nuts for him and then watched him toss them into the air and catch them on his moist red tongue.

'How is he these days?' she said.

'Old George? - same as ever. Up and down. Up and down. Same as ever.'

Once again she stared at the passing woodlands, remembering. Unconsciously, as she did so, she twisted quietly at the big signet ring on Lattimore's finger. The motion began to make him, in his half-drunk state, soothed and amorous. He turned his face towards her and put his mouth against her hair.

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‘Ought to have married you, Thelma,’ he said. ‘Ought to have put the ring on you.’

‘You don’t want me.’

‘You like the ring?’ he said. ‘You can have it.’ He began struggling in groping alcoholic fashion to take the ring off his finger. ‘Have it, Thelma – you put it on.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘No.’ And then: ‘How was George Furness when you saw him last Wednesday?’

He succeeded suddenly in taking the ring from his finger and began pressing it clumsily on one of her own.

‘There y’are, Thelma. You put it on. You wear it. For me. Put it on and keep it, Thelma. For me.’

The ring was on her finger.

‘How was George?’ she said.

‘Getting fat,’ he said. ‘Can’t get the old pod over the snooker table nowadays. Rest and be thankful – that’s what they call George.’

Half sleepy, half drunk, Lattimore let his head slip from her shoulder and the mass of her thick red hair down to the shapeless comforting pillow of her bosom and she said:

‘What’s he travel in now? The same old line?’

‘Same old line,’ he said. ‘Furniture and carpets. Mostly carpets now.’

She realized suddenly that they were talking of quite different things, quite different people. She was listening to a muddled drunk who had somehow got the names wrong. She stared for a long time at the woods rushing past the rattling little train. There was no need to speak. Lattimore was asleep on her bosom, his mouth open, and the ring was shining on her finger.

THELMA

Next day Lattimore did not remember the ring and she did not give it back. She kept it, as she kept a great many other things, as a memento of experiences that men liked to think were services she had rendered.

A drawer in the wardrobe in her bedroom was full of these things. She hardly ever used them: handkerchiefs, nightdress cases and bits of underwear from travellers in ladies' wear, bottles of perfume and powder, nightdresses and dress-lengths of satin, necklaces of imitation pearl and amber; presents given for Christmas, her birthday, or for a passing, comforting week-end.

Some of the men who had given them came back only once or twice and she never saw them again. They changed jobs or were moved to other districts. But they never forgot Thelma and travellers were always arriving to say that they had seen Bill Haynes and Charlie Townsend or Bert Hobbs only the week before and that Bill or Charlie or Bert wished to be remembered. Among themselves too men would wink and say 'Never need be lonely down at The Blenheim. What do you say, Harry? Thelma always looks after you,' and many a man would be recommended to stay there, on the edge of the forest, where he would be well looked after by Thelma, rather than go on to bigger towns beyond.

By the time she was forty she was not only plumper and more shapeless but her hair had begun to show the first cottony signs of grey. There was nothing she disliked more than red hair streaked with another colour and from that time onwards she began to dye her hair. Because she could never shop anywhere except in the village or at most in Chippingham, the junction, twelve miles away, she

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never succeeded in getting quite the right shade for her hair. The first dye she used was a little too yellow and gave her hair the appearance of an old fox fur. One day the shop in the village ran out of this dye and sold her something which, they said, was the nearest thing. This shade made her hair look as if stained with a mixture of beetroot and bay rum. It was altogether too dark for her. Later when the shop got in its new supplies of the yellow dye she uneasily realized that neither tint was suitable. The only thing that occurred to her to do then was to mix them together. This gave a strange gold rusty look to her hair and something in the dye at the same time made it much drier, so that it became unnaturally fuzzier and more difficult to manage than it had been.

The one thing that did not change about her as she grew older was the colour and appearance of her eyes. They remained unchangeably bleached and distant, always with the effect of the mild soft lashes being still wet with a touch of gold paint on them. While the rest of her body grew plumper and older and greyer the eyes remained, perhaps because of their extreme pallor, very young, almost girlish as if in a way that part of her would never grow up.

It was these still pale, bleached, unnaturally adolescent eyes that she fixed on a man named Sharwood more than ten years later as she took him a tray of early morning tea and a newspaper on a wet late October morning, soon after she was fifty. During the night torrents of rain had hurled through the miles of beeches, bringing down great flying droves of leaves. Through the open bedroom window rain had poured in too on the curtains and as Thelma reached up to shut the window she said:

THELMA

‘Not much of a morning to be out, sir. Which way are you off today?’

‘London,’ he said.

There was no need for him to say any more. Purposely she fussed a little with the curtains and then casually, in the same slow, upward-singing voice, asked the inevitable question:

‘London? I suppose you never run into George Furness up there?’

Sharwood, a middle-aged man who travelled mainly in woollen goods, put three lumps of sugar into his tea, stirred it and then said:

‘As a matter of fact I was thinking of asking you the same question.’

‘Me?’

‘Funny thing,’ Sharwood said, ‘it was George who recommended me here.’

Her heart began racing, fast and heavily, as it had done on the warm afternoon with Lattimore, drunk in the train.

‘Ran across him up in Glasgow about a month ago,’ Sharwood said. ‘You knew he was up there, didn’t you – I mean had been. Been up there for thirty years – settled there. Even got himself a bit of a Scotch accent on the way.’

‘No, I didn’t know,’ she said. ‘I never only saw him the once.’

She did not know quite why she should admit, for the first and only time, that she had seen him only once, but by now she was so transfixed and overwrought that she hardly knew what she was saying.

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'I know,' Sharwood said. 'He told me. It's been all those years ago, he said, but if you go to The Blenheim Arms ask if Thelma's still there. She'll look after you.'

She locked her hands together to prevent them quivering too hopelessly and he said:

'That was the last time he was ever down this way. He moved up to Glasgow the next week. Heard of a good job there with a big wholesale firm of cloth people and there he stopped.'

Sharwood paused, drank his tea, and stared over the rim of the cup to the October rain slashing on the window beyond.

'He'd have been up there just thirty-five years if he'd lived till November.'

Her heart seemed to stop its racing.

She did not know what to say or do. Then after a moment Sharwood said:

'Hand me my wallet off the wash-stand, will you? I've got a cutting about him. Clipped it out of the *Glasgow Herald*.'

She stood staring for a few moments longer at the newspaper cutting that Sharwood handed her across the bed. The face of George Furness stared back at her from a photograph and she said simply:

'I don't think he's changed a lot, do you?'

'Same as ever,' Sharwood said. 'You'd have known him anywhere.'

That afternoon, although it was a mid-week afternoon, she left The Blenheim Arms about three o'clock, walked up the road and into the forest. The rain had stopped about noon and now it was a day of racing sea-bright

cloud, widening patches of high blue sky and a wind that broke from the beeches an endless stream of leaves.

She walked slowly down the long riding. She stopped for a few moments at the place where she and George Furness had eaten beech-nuts and where, some years later, she had tried for the first of many times to recapture the moment with another man. She picked up a few beech-nuts and made an attempt to peel them but the summer that year had been rainy and cool and most of the husks she broke were empty.

Finally she walked on and did something she had never done before. Slowly, in brightening sunlight, through shoals of drenched fallen leaves, she walked the entire width of the forest to the other side. It was really, after all, not so far as people had always led her to believe.

By the time she reached the open country beyond the last of the enormous beeches the sky had been driven almost clear of cloud. The sun was warm and brilliant and as she sat down on a bank of leaves at the forest edge she could feel it burning softly on her face and hands.

After a time she lay down. She lay there for two hours, not moving, her frizzed foxy hair blown against wet leaves, her bleached pale eyes staring upwards beyond the final rim of forest branches to where the sky, completely clear now of cloud, was almost fierce with high washed blue light in the falling afternoon.

That night she did not sleep much. The following night she was restless and there was a sharp, drawing pain in her back whenever she breathed a little hard. The following afternoon the doctor stood by her bed and said, shaking his head, joking with her:

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‘Now, Thelma, what’s all this? What have you been up to? It’s getting cool at night this time of year.’

‘I sat down in the forest,’ she said. ‘That’s all. I lay down for a while.’

‘You know, Thelma,’ he said, ‘you’re getting too old for lying down in the forest. You’ve got a good warm bed, haven’t you?’

‘I like the forest.’

‘You’re really getting too old for this sort of thing,’ he said. ‘Now be a good girl and take care of yourself a little better. You’ve had your fling – we all know – but now you’ll have to take care a little more. Understand?’

She made no sign that she understood except for a slight flicker of her thin pale gold lashes.

‘There comes a time,’ the doctor said.

She died five days later. On the coffin and on the grave-side in the churchyard that lay midway between the village and the forest there were a great many wreaths. Many gentlemen had remembered her, most of them individually. But someone had had the idea of placing a collecting box in the bar of The Blenheim Arms so that casual callers, odd travellers passing, could put into it a few coppers or a shilling or two and so pay their last respects.

A good deal of money was collected in this way and because so many people, mostly men, had contributed something it was impossible to indicate who and how many there were. It was thought better instead to put on the big round wreath of white chrysanthemums only a plain white card.

‘Thelma. R.I.P.,’ it said. ‘Loved by all.’

The Snow Line

I

ARTHUR BROWNING lived unadventurously for the first thirty years of his life with his mother, in a little corner shop selling sweets and newspapers and looking across to the branch line railway station of a small boot-manufacturing town. What a fine position it was, they all said, unopposed and without competition, with so many people arriving and departing and wanting their newspapers as they came and went: one of the best you could find in the world.

Regularly and unambitiously Arthur met the morning and evening trains with their loads of newspapers. All day as he served in the shop he heard the clap of dray-horse hooves on the granite sets of the station yard; the slide of wheel-skids as drays came down on wet or frosty mornings from goods warehouses, loaded with packing-cases, new machinery, and vast bundles of cracking belly-leather. Every day he breathed the same combined smells: a sulphur fustiness of coal and train smoke, a harsh dog-like odour of sole leather, a sort of drab sweetness in the little shop. There seemed nothing about all this to make him dissatisfied, simply because for all these years his mother had directed his purposes. It was always 'Arthur will see to it; Arthur will find out; Arthur will be only too pleased; Arthur will attend to you,' and in fact Arthur did see, he did find out, he was only too pleased and always in

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his woollen, undemanding and unadventurous way he made it his business to attend.

Soon after he was thirty his mother died. For six or seven years before that he had been talking, awkwardly, shyly, mostly over the shop counter, to a Miss Shortland: a pale-faced school-teacher with tight lips and a tight black bun of hair knotted rather like the tails of some of the dray horses that came down from the station yards. Most of the time he wore a Norfolk jacket of pepper and salt tweed with wide vents at the back, varied in summer, in hot weather, by one of cream alpaca. On Sundays he wore suits of thick herringbone tweed and a bowler hat. From the cuffs of these suits his red hands, rather large for a small man, always managed somehow to stick out, like lumps of underdone pork. His head too was rather large and his eyes, in keeping, gleamed roundly like the blue glass marbles he sold to boys.

‘Mother has left me a little money,’ he said.

He had made it his business to attend to Miss Shortland almost exactly as he attended to other customers; there was a feeling that his affection for her was simply a careful ounce or two of sweetness, wrapped up in a paper bag.

‘Rather a lot of money,’ he said. ‘Rather more than I thought.’

Miss Shortland did not say anything; some day there would be an inevitable end to school-teaching and now, at last, she began to tell herself, perhaps that time had come.

‘Rather over six thousand pounds,’ he said. ‘And the shop of course.’

To Miss Shortland it was an incredible and wonderful surprise; but before she could speak he went on:

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'I don't know quite what I'll do yet, but I thought of going for a little holiday somewhere. Abroad.'

'Abroad?'

'I thought of Switzerland,' he said. His large glass-like eyes, protuberant and boyish and blue, took on a queer myopic sort of vacancy. He seemed held by a far-off dream: 'I've always had a fancy to see the mountains.'

To Miss Shortland the project did not appear at all impressive. Mountains, as she was afterwards to discover, were not among the things that most attracted her. But in his polite, shop-like, eternally attentive sort of way Arthur said:

'Of course I'd like you to come with me. Would you? It would be nice in August. Just the two of us for a week or two.'

It was that simple phrase, 'just the two of us', one of the most intimate he had ever spoken to her, that finally won her over; it opened, or appeared to open, innumerable and incalculable doors beyond the life of a schoolmistress teaching a class of forty pig-tailed girls in a red-brick factory town. She felt the door of stuffy and spinsterish drudgery closing at last behind her; a world of intimacy and comfortable possession opening out beyond.

Three weeks later, in August, they went off to a small village called Heiligenswendi, among hills of drying hay-cocks, in the Bernese Oberland. Up there – he had looked it all up in a map – he somehow fondly imagined edelweiss would be growing in accessible crevices and he would be able to taste something of the world above the snow-line, filling himself with the stimulating splendour of high places. Instead he found a sub-alpine countryside, under

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a humid August sun, heavy as damp green spinach. Sweating peasants scythed solidly through fields of lucerne and then, having finished them, mowed twice as solidly back again. The *pension* he had chosen was one of those large wooden houses, painted a dull red, in the style of Swiss Gothic, and his own room and Miss Shortland's looked out on a barricade of sunless pines. Out of this black hill forest there appeared from time to time groups of shambling men wearing yellow straw hats shaped like topees. They shuffled out of shadow into sun with haunted eyes. They came from the asylum further up the hill.

To Miss Shortland, after two days, they became part of the general obnoxiousness; they became linked with the smell of peasant cigars that mingled harshly with odours of sauerkraut and boiled garlic sausage provided by Frau Roth in the dining room below.

'But what made you *choose* this place? What made you think -'

'The guide book said it was very beautiful.'

'Did it say anything about the lunatic asylum? Not a word, I'm sure, did it?'

'Well, no - but I think it *is* beautiful - I think the mountains -'

'Yes, but what do we *do*? For three weeks - what do we *do*?'

'We can walk,' he said.

Afterwards, for two days, they walked about humid spinach-like fields that lay shut in between black slopes of pines. Against enchanting glimpses of a lake below, where white sails and steamers glided past, apples were ripening on wind-bowed trees and a few slender autumn crocus

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were flowering, pink-mauve, in the long grass beneath them.

But Miss Shortland, tired of school-teaching, had not come on holiday for lakes or apples or autumn crocus or lunatics in straw hats. She did not like walking. She wanted something of Arthur, alone. Her determined chin and her black rather horse-like hair, coarse and tightly bound, were distinctive parts of a face that had almost no colour. Her skin looked pallid and bloodless. Her cold dark eyes concealed entirely the fact that she was burning inside.

The second afternoon, after long silences over the hated lunchtime sausage, they walked for two or three miles above the lakeside before she gave up and lay down exhausted in the grass.

In a peckish and oblique sort of way they had been near to quarrelling all morning and now the deep heat of the August day, concentrated and steamy, pressed up through lush alpine grass and through her thin cotton dress and on to her body. In the pine-laden air, rich and stifling, she felt she could not breathe. She unbuttoned the neck of her dress and threw her arms outwards, palms down, on the grass.

Arthur sat with hands locked over his knees, staring away.

‘Why don’t you come and lie down?’

‘I’m looking at the mountains,’ he said. ‘I can’t take my eyes off them.’

She gave a choking sound of impotent anger into the grass, unable to speak. He was still wearing, as he had worn for years in the little shop, the thick tobacco-brown

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jacket with its wide vents in the back. These vents had always infuriated her. Now, more than ever, they seemed to need ironing out. They made him look curiously old-maidish, dowdy, and out of place, rousing in her an enraged and possessive desire to take him in hand.

‘How do you get up there, I wonder?’ he said.

‘You take a train,’ she said; and he in turn said the worst possible thing in reply:

‘As a matter of fact there is a train. It goes up through the Jungfrau.’

Angry and tired, she felt nothing but the hot throb of her feet after the long walk; and after some moments she said:

‘My feet hurt terribly. Take off my shoes, will you? Be a dear and undo them for me.’

In his slow, woollen, and uncomplaining way he took off her shoes. For years he had made it his business to attend to such things. She felt his hands and then the cool air on the hot soles of her feet. It was delicious and she said:

‘Would you mind if I took my stockings off?’ She spoke without anger. ‘You can look at the mountains –’

She did not finish because he was in fact already looking at the mountains; he was not interested in her naked white legs as she rolled her stockings down; and she said:

‘Come and lie down. It’s cool in the grass.’

‘If I lie down I can’t look at the mountains.’

She stared savagely at the sky and said: ‘When did you get this thing about mountains?’

‘I didn’t know I had a thing about mountains. Who said? –’

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'Said?' She felt she must scream. 'You've talked of nothing else all day!'

'Yes, but there's nothing *wrong* with it, is there? I mean neither one of us is bound to think just like the other. We're old enough -'

'Old!' she said. 'Old! I'll die of it if we don't get out and *do* something -'

After that she walked back to the hotel alone, carrying her shoes, getting a curious thwarted pleasure out of walking barefoot in the grass.

On that steaming evening Frau Roth chose to give them for supper a dish called *Berner plat*. It was rich and salty and gross and Miss Shortland felt they ought to have eaten it with shovels.

Half-way through the meal Arthur looked at her with the glassy, over-kindly, bulging eyes that she always felt would have looked better in spectacles and said:

'I suppose I ought to tell you I'm going off tomorrow for a day alone.'

She dug her fork into nauseating messes of fat meat, not speaking.

'Would you mind?'

'Mind? Why should I mind?'

'I thought you might.'

'You think the oddest things, don't you?'

After supper they sat together on the veranda outside the hotel. The lighted windows of the lunatic asylum winked beyond woods of pines, and the stars, wonderfully scintillating in the dark summer sky, winked above the mountains. The *Berner plat* had given Miss Shortland heart-burn. When Herr Roth appeared, smoking a heavy

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black cigar and talking, almost champing, in Bernese, she got up and excused herself and went to bed.

In her bedroom the air seemed more stuffy and stifling than ever. Her head ached as she undressed and lay down outside the coverlet, in her nightgown, having left the door on the catch so that she could hear Arthur when he came to bed. Irritation, suspense, the fretful bickerings of the day: all of them could, she felt, if Arthur only understood, be so simply and pleasantly and finally dissolved. In a few moments, there on the bed, he could remove all the wretchedness she felt about asylums and sauerkraut and heart-burn and walking on mountains.

When she heard Arthur come upstairs to bed at last she felt her heart racing.

‘Arthur: is it you?’

‘Yes.’

With her breast bounding and racing she waited for him to come in, but he made no sign of coming in.

‘Are you really going tomorrow?’

‘I wanted to.’

‘Where are you going?’

‘To the Niederhorn.’

‘What’s the Niederhorn?’

‘A mountain.’

Writhing on the bed, hugging herself, staring at the lights of the lunatic asylum reflected on the ceiling, she did not answer.

‘I’ll try not to be late,’ he said.

She did not answer.

‘Good night,’ he said.

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Again she did not answer.

'Sleep well,' he said. After this there was a silence as if perhaps he was not certain of something. 'You're not peeved?'

'Not peeved!' She writhed once more on the bed. 'Good night.'

The lights of the asylum, for some reason or another did not go out till dawn.

II

Next day he climbed his first mountain.

Years later he would look back on that day with amused but affectionate awe. He did the first part of the journey by post-bus, carrying with him a pile of bread and sausage and hard boiled eggs packed for him by Frau Roth, and the second by funicular. The third was mostly an affair of paths carefully marked, winding up through spinach-green woods dripping with heavy dew. It was nothing more than a scramble for an hour or two. But years of steady and attentive waiting in the little shop had left him flabby, and on the hot mountain-side he had difficulty in getting his breath. He rushed up the damp but hot paths with clumsy and excited steps, sweating, mouth open, head down. Whenever there was a spring in the woods he doused his face and mouth and hands, feeling curiously light-headed with fatigue and heat and altitude.

It was mid-afternoon before he reached the top. All the way up, under the physical stress of the climb, he had been vaguely aware that he had committed some sort of in-

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justice against Miss Shortland. It was his business, somehow, to make it up to her. Perhaps a sprig or two of edelweiss was the answer: a peace offering from the summit of his first mountain.

But when he got to the top, about three o'clock, he was finished. In utter exhaustion he lay face downwards against a rock. All his spirit, his naïve and rushing enthusiasm, had drained sickly away. For about twenty minutes he could not drag himself to his feet again.

When he staggered upright at last he felt himself choking. Not, this time, with fatigue or sickness, or with any remembered sense of injustice against Miss Shortland. He was exalted into speechless ecstasy by the view. Below him the lake glittered like snakeskin in the breeze and heat of afternoon and all beyond it, repeated and repeated into great distances, like the crested back of a white dinosaur, stretched the pure icy world of summer snow. Out of all that terrific range of Jungfrau and Eiger and Mönch and Schreckhorn and Silberhorn, flashing and monumental under the blue hot sky, he could not name a single peak. He simply stood choking and staring, the core of himself quivering and pumping with joy.

Thirty years later they put a ski-lift up there, so that tourists could do in twenty minutes the two thousand five hundred feet that had taken him half a day. When he heard of it he felt it did him a keen and personal wrong. It was a vulgar affront to the feelings that had stormed and stunned him that afternoon.

And what he did feel was a curious mixture. His joy was shot through, in a strange way, with an old sadness. Underneath all his naïve ecstasies there was a numb pain

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of unforeshadowed regret. Out of the rose bright web of feeling came the thought of his mother. Insecure and lost, he grieved for her so painfully up there that he began to cry. Many weeks of conventional solicitude had left him without any visible sort of grief for her, but now he let the tears for her come readily and quickly, in a sticky hot flow, until they burned and dazzled his eyes, turning the mountains as he stared at them into painful white splinterings against the sun.

But there was no edelweiss for Miss Shortland; and in fact he did not think of it again. The painful fusion of joy and insecurity, of his mother who had gone and the mountains that had so suddenly unlocked his tears for her, left him with a stunning impression of wonder and yet of something unsatisfied. In a way it was as if he had almost, but not quite, rediscovered her there.

He climbed down to the hotel in a numb and sobered way, his feelings lessening as he came down. His joy resolved itself into a deep pleasure that he felt would not be complete until he had spoken of it, somehow, to someone else; and he was once again troubled by thoughts of injustice to Miss Shortland.

But at the hotel Miss Shortland was not in her room; and in his own room he found a letter.

Miss Shortland explained that she had left for Interlaken. She understood there were nice shops there and sociable people and hotels with decent food and orchestras to which one could dance at night. She dwelt with pointed delicacy on the fact that he did not understand her. She hoped he would get over his thing about mountains. Perhaps when they were both back home again they would,

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as she put it, begin to see things in their right perspective. She at any rate thought they might, and she hoped that he would think so too.

Arthur did not think so; and he did not go to Inter-laken.

III

He stayed alone in the mountains until the end of September, a month longer than he had intended, and then he went back home.

He did not open the little shop. The microcosm of the station corner, with its travellers and their newspapers, drays and dray horses, its smell of coal and leather, smoke, and sweets in bottles, had died. The little manufacturing town, where he knew almost every face and every brick and where, as they all said, that position of his on the corner was one of the best in the world, no longer meant anything to him at all. There was an end, suddenly, of 'Arthur will see to it; Arthur will find out; Arthur will be only too pleased; Arthur will attend to you.' There was also an end, or at least he hoped, to Miss Shortland. In fact he was not to see her again for many years.

After he had sold the shop he had, with his mother's money and his own, a little under ten thousand pounds. He calculated it might last him, with care, for forty years. He was going to live modestly, existing in little *pensions* and travelling third class. He was going to live among mountains.

By the fourth year after all this he had acquired a certain aloof bearing, silent and rather solemn. The early

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thirties had begun to put on him a sort of shell-like puffiness that travelling and mountains did not take away. And until that year he travelled – in and out of Switzerland, over to Austria, across to Germany, once or twice to the Pyrenees and the Dolomites – quite alone.

Up to that time he had followed, quite instinctively, the line he afterwards discovered most climbers took: summer in the Oberland, then the Engadine, then Zermatt, with ambitions about the Matterhorn. His first moment above the snow-line had been at the Tiefen glacier. It was early September; great crevices of ice flashed with dazzling vitriolic beauty and he almost choked with joy. From above he saw for the first time too the superb cresting fall of the Rhône glacier, with Galenstock above. It was a fearful and wonderful experience; but again, unexpectedly, he was affected by a sense of insecurity and loneliness that recalled his mother. Out of this insecurity rose a feeling that he wanted her there to share that singular experience of solitude and altitude: that it was really nothing without her.

During this time, occasionally, he thought also of Miss Shortland. It did not strike him as odd that over a considerable distance of time she continued to repel him. He had always shrunk from touching her. Her hair, coarse and black and shining, had grown out of the thick colourless skin of her neck in a way that made the hairs on his own neck stiffen and creep cold. Neither in the alpine grass nor the alpine bedroom had he ever quite got over that queer sensation.

The following summer he went to Zermatt, full of ambition to climb the Breithorn. The weather, with the wind

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in the south, blowing warm low rain, made his first four days in a small hotel, without another Englishman, a misery of lonely frustration. It seemed as if cloud would never lift even from the lower meadows, with their mournful bell-donging cows.

On the fourth evening there came into the bar a young man carrying a rucksack so large that Arthur mistook him at first for one of those German students who then slogged the roads of Europe like obedient snails. He was overjoyed when this lean tired figure asked in English for a room.

After supper he introduced himself.

'Would you join me in a beer? My name is Brown-ing.'

The young man had eyes of fiery violet blue set in whites of dazzling clearness.

'Mine's Parkman,' he said.

'First trip over here?'

'Not really. I came once with my parents. On holiday.'

'But first time climbing?'

'Not really,' the boy said. 'The first time alone.'

For an hour or more they talked and drank beer; but the boy, tired from a long walk in the rain, seemed except for the fiery violet eyes rather like a pale chrysalis not fully awakened. He seemed unaware of the extent of Arthur's almost ferocious friendliness, of his big protuberant eyes hungrily impelled, gazing across at him over the heavy beer-mugs in the light of rain-splashed windows.

Arthur spoke at last of the Breithorn. 'I've got the guide and everything fixed,' he said. 'We're simply waiting for the cloud to break up. Would you care to come?'

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'I've never really done anything so high.'

'You would be perfectly all right. You could have absolute trust in the guide. Brucker. He's wonderful.'

The boy did not answer and Arthur remembered how, on his own first naïve scramble to the Niederhorn, he had longed, tangled up in a web of emotion, for someone to share his joy.

'It would be a terrific thing for you,' he said. 'It's one of the great mountains.'

'I suppose it is.'

'And of course it's always better with someone with you. Somehow there's an awful sense of frustration – I don't know – if someone isn't there.'

'I'm probably pushing on tomorrow,' the boy said.

'It would be an awful pity to miss it,' Arthur said. 'Would you feel more confident if we went to see the guide?'

Later it turned out that the glass was rising and the guide, old and leathery and sardonic, prophesied the day would be good.

The three of them started the following morning at half past four. It was starlight and cold, and the boy, obviously, did not want to go. One of his boots had knuckled through being badly dried after rain and he complained continually that it hurt him and would not fit.

The guide was sardonically cheerful: 'Alley-oop, shentlemen!' he kept saying. 'Alley-oop!'

Throughout the day, together, he and Arthur nursed the boy along. Dawn broke in flying steely feathers of rose and grey, in branching and spinning trails of deeper red and purple that massed into high ridges of snow-pure

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cloud. For Arthur the experience was full of a wonderful invigorating buoyancy and all day the guide sang out sardonically:

‘Alley-oop now, shentlemen! Alley-oop!’

They spent that night at the Theodule Pass. The boy had been limping badly for some time before they got there; and for the last mile or two Arthur had fussed over him like a hen.

Then, to Arthur’s annoyance, there were already other climbers in the hut. Two Swiss from Zurich, systematically drying wet socks and sweaty shirts, had cornered one end, and at the other were two English students, one a girl. She was very dark, with bronzy black eyes and smooth healthy brown arms from which the sleeves of her scarlet jumper, rolled up, came away like the tight peel of fruit. She was busy combing her hair when Arthur arrived pulling it in long sweeps from the nape of her neck and then over, in a black curtain, to one side of her face, and then tossing it away again, in an arching, upward jerk. These gestures produced in him the uneasy creeping coldness at the back of the neck that he had experienced with Miss Shortland.

The girl took one quick look at him, and then, for the rest of the evening, hardly another that did not mock him. She began from the first to be fascinated by Parkman. The student, a big-boned man with a shock of coarse yellow hair and a face skinned raw by alpine sun, sat at the table gnawing lumps of rye bread and drinking red wine and reading a detective novel. Outwardly he did not seem to care whether the girl looked at Parkman, at Arthur, or at the two Swiss. He spoke to her with drawling and weary

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affection, always gnawing bread: 'Oh! don't be so footling, darling. Don't drivel, sweetheart.'

All the time Arthur was fussily anxious for Parkman's foot. 'We must get it right,' he kept saying. 'We must. We can't neglect it, you know.'

'It's really not bad,' the boy said.

'You looked pretty grim as we came up.'

'I don't think it's anything to worry about.'

'On mountains feet are always of importance,' Arthur said. 'It's the first axiom of climbing. Isn't that so?' he said to the student. 'You'd agree, wouldn't you?'

'Oh! Jesus, yes. First axiom,' the student said. 'Never have a foot off.'

'Did you ever see a good climber with a wooden leg?' the girl said.

Sitting at the table, her face pressed into her cupped hands, she watched Parkman take off his boots. She looked at him for some time with a long sleepy under-glance, still and quiet. Presently he limped over to his rucksack and she followed him with slow dark eyes.

Arthur, for some reason he could not fathom, felt suddenly pained as he watched the boy come to the table with a packet of cigarettes and offer one to the girl.

'Not now,' she said. 'Perhaps later.'

'Light one for me, sweetheart,' the student said and went on reading and gnawing wine-soaked bread.

'Anything else?' she said.

'Darling, you wring my poor tired heart.'

She took a cigarette and put it in her mouth. She took the matches from Parkman's hand and lit the cigarette and drew at it slowly.

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The student, without looking up from his book, held out his hand. She put the cigarette into Parkman's mouth instead.

'There,' she said softly, 'that'll soothe your nerves.'

Small flames of anger raced about Arthur's chest, dying quickly, leaving him cold.

'Oh! come on, poppet, light me one,' the student said. 'Stop bandying.'

'Men are all alike, aren't they, Mr Browning?' she said.

Arthur, clenched and coldly earnest, did not answer.

'I think I'll get to bed,' Parkman said.

'Oh! no. You can't,' the girl said. 'Oh! no. Mr Browning has to look at your foot.'

'I'm very tired myself,' Arthur said. 'We ought to be up early tomorrow.'

'No,' she said. 'Seriously. Feet are feet. Especially on mountains.'

She got up from the table, pushing the sleeves of her jumper farther up her brown full arms.

'Come on,' she said. 'Give me that foot.'

Suddenly, resolute and capable and physically sure of herself, her full breasts tightening under the scarlet jumper, she lifted her body and threw back her hair.

'Get that sock off.'

'Oh! no really,' Parkman said.

'Obey the beautiful bitch,' the student said. 'Obey her.'

'Shut up, thug,' she said. She looked steadily and, as Arthur afterwards realized, quite tenderly at Parkman. 'I'm not kidding,' she said. 'Mr Browning is quite right. Feet can be fatal.'

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'Feet *fatale*, *femme fatale*,' the student said. 'What difference?'

Slowly Parkman pulled off his sock, putting his foot on a stool; and Arthur, peering over, saw where the knuckled boot had rubbed the white flesh to a skinless red scar.

'Can I do something?'

'No, we'll manage,' she said.

Her voice, almost curt after all the casual banter with the student, cut Arthur cruelly. He could not speak. He stood staring down at Parkman's foot as she held it in the lap of her skirt between her bare brown knees.

'It's badly blistered, that's all,' she said. 'Tender?'

Gently she touched the foot with the tips of her fingers and Parkman winced. 'It's better to get it done.' She smiled softly, and Parkman smiled back at her.

'Would you see to the boot, Mr Browning?' she said. 'Grease it a bit. See if you can soften it.'

Dismally Arthur walked across the hut to find the boot, and the student, yawning with raw wine-wet mouth, said:

'Ah! well, bed for this boy.'

He leaned across the table, scrutinizing with pained curiosity Parkman's foot, making dry noises of alarm.

'It is my considered view you should call in a second opinion.'

'Shut up. Go to bed.'

'It is my considered view that the foot should be amputated.'

'How is it now?' the girl said. She had bathed it clean and was covering it, now, with clean lint. 'Comfortable?'

'Absolutely all right,' the boy said.

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'Once we have amputated you won't feel a thing,' the student said.

'Go to bed,' she said. 'I think you're drunk.'

'Who wanted this bloody jaunt in the first place?' he said.

After Arthur and the student had gone to bed Parkman and the girl sat for more than an hour at the table, talking. Arthur listened to them unhappily as he rolled in his sleeping-bag, unable to catch a word.

In the morning, as he had feared, the five of them climbed to the top together. From there the view was stupendous and beautiful; the wide glacial flashing world, clear of cloud, was terrible and beautiful in the sun. But the privacy, the intimacy, the final fearful moment of ecstasy he had hoped for were not there. The student shouted wildly across the heights, waiting for his own boisterous echoes to come ringing back. Parkman limped a little with his foot. The girl helped him along and the guide kept shouting:

'Alley-oop, shentleman and lady! Alley-oop!'

Vainly, up there, Arthur tried to come between the girl and Parkman.

'You see, it was worth it, Parkman. Wasn't it? Don't you think so? Aren't you glad you came?'

Only the student answered, chanting idiotically: 'Oh! my darling, oh! my darling. Oh! my darling Parkman mine!' while the girl and Parkman pointed out to each other the vast pearl-blue distances of Italy, far away.

'He will make a good climber, won't he?' Arthur said.

'Which?' the guide said and grinned sardonically at the student. 'This shentleman?'

'No, no,' Browning said. 'The other. The boy.'

'Gut, yes!' the guide said; and winked. 'Alley-ooop!'

Next day Parkman, the student, and the girl went on down the valley. The student, who had lost his boisterousness, no longer called the girl darling; he had a sort of bruised aloofness as he thrust out his sun-skinned face and walked ahead; and now, behind him, it was the turn of Parkman and the girl to taunt him, laughing at his hunched retreating back.

In the small hotel Arthur felt restless and alone. For a few hours, starting out there with the boy, in the starry summer morning, he had felt all insecurity and loneliness fade: to be presently replaced by something he had never known in the presence of Miss Shortland. He was not at all sure of that feeling: he could not resolve it into conscious thought. But it was warm and tender, uplifting him exactly as he has been uplifted on his first naïve scramble to the Niederhorn.

Two days later he went on by train to Andermatt alone. At the station, in the shops, and at the Gasthof where he was to stay, he found that people were talking of very little else except a climbing disaster to three English climbers on a crag. With terror he remembered the idiotic bantering student, the girl who was too beautiful, and Parkman's foot.

He was part of a rescue party that found the three bodies in a gorge. It had been nothing but a stupid, futile, tragic afternoon lark by Parkman and the two students to climb a crag that was hardly a mountain at all. With amateurish and clumsy folly they had underestimated it. As the bodies were laid out on the mountainside of raw dark rock he

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thought the body of Parkman looked hauntingly and unbearably young. He did not look at the girl; but the student, for one ghastly moment, seemed to grin at him in the sun.

He never quite recovered from the reckless, pointless, mocking folly of that day. It was something that should never have happened. It was summer. It was within reach of peasants solidly mowing deep lush alpine clover-grass. It seemed as safe as the Sussex Downs.

There was not even any snow.

IV

He climbed a great deal during the next ten years, and he began to be solidly competent rather than expert. Even so there would appear, from time to time, a paragraph or two about his feats in the one local paper back at home.

During this time he graduated from what is sometimes termed a centrist. His world enlarged. He ceased to be a traveller merely estimating, as a centrist does, the surrounding distance from one central peak alone. He learned to explore mountain systems crosswise, by traverse, ascending and descending, discovering them not by individual peaks but as masses of earth-crust, huge and awesome, formidably and wonderfully folded. He ceased to be interested in peaks, especially larger and more famous ones, simply as peaks. They presently began to have significance only as part of a vast system, all of which must be conquered: in his case mostly, except for guides, alone.

All this time he did not know that Miss Shortland, on that first hot lunatic-haunted holiday in the Oberland, had

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waited nearly a week for him in Interlaken. He did not know that she had twice taken the post-bus up the road to Frau Roth's hotel and had walked up and down the road there, half a mile away, in the hope that he would come out and walk there too. He did not know that she had sometimes, at home, posted herself in the ladies' waiting-room at the branch-line station, so that she could watch his movements, during a few weeks of that autumn, as he cleared up his affairs in and about the shop. Her familiarity with that view across wet granite sets, streaming on rainy days with yellow stains of horse-dung and rainbow gleams of spilled oil, across to that unopposed and profitable position that everyone said was one of the best in the world, became as great as his own had been. And he did not know that either.

Fifteen years after the holiday at Frau Roth's hotel, sausage-ridden and ruined by trivialities like lunatics and heartburn, the local paper printed a warm account of Arthur's part in the rescue of two German climbers on a peak above the Ragli glacier.

'Well-known local Alpinist, Mr Arthur Browning, formerly a familiar figure in the town, last week accomplished, together with a party of Swiss guides, a remarkable rescue feat in the Bernese Oberland; and so on. There had even been a line or two about it, though he did not know it, in the national papers; and the local paper had also managed to print an agency picture of himself taken with the party of Swiss guides, outside his hotel at Lauterbrunnen.

About a week later he received a letter:

'Dear Arthur: I simply wanted you to know that an old

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friend felt very proud when she read of your feat in the Alps last week. Everyone was talking about it here. It isn't often one gets the chance of saying one knows a celebrity, but I must say it was a very pleasant experience for me. Sincerely: Olive Sanderson.'

For some time he had not the least idea who Olive Sanderson could be. There were, he knew, Sandersons at home, in leather, a family of solid bovine sons who had built or bought for themselves solid red-brick houses on the valley-side; but he had never known them well. He thought of them as frequenting golf-circles and Rotarian dinners and dances and perhaps, though not frequently, Nonconformist church on Sunday.

He pondered on this for some time; and then it occurred to him suddenly that Olive Sanderson, Mrs Olive Sanderson, could only be Miss Shortland. He had never known another person named Olive; and it was unlikely that there was anyone else who could claim to call herself an old friend.

In his polite, attentive, unexciting way he wrote back:

'Dear Olive: Thank you very much for your letter. You may be sure it always gives me considerable pleasure to hear from someone at home. I'm afraid I don't often get back there now and I did not know you were married. If it is not too late please allow me to offer my congratulations and to say that I hope you will be very happy.'

A few days later the former Miss Shortland wrote back:

'My husband and I have been thinking of coming to Switzerland for a week or two next month but I'm afraid we don't know much about hotels and the best places and so on. Would it be asking too much of you, I wonder, to

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recommend us something? I have always wanted to see the Oberland again. I've never forgotten the autumn crocuses and it must be very thrilling when one knows it better. It could hardly be *less* thrilling than here, as you can probably guess. Sincerely, Olive. ps. Not *too* high in the mountains please. We're not all such expert alpinists as you, I'm afraid.'

With politeness and attention he wrote back: 'There is such a choice of hotels here that it isn't easy to know what to recommend. I think the best thing for you and your husband to do is to come up here as far as Lauterbrunnen (you take the little train from Interlaken) and pick on something you like. You couldn't find a better spot; the scenery is magnificent. I shall probably be here or hereabouts until the end of July and if you let me know when you are coming I shall be only too pleased to do all I can to get you comfortably fixed up. I know the lie of the land pretty well.'

A little later he heard that they would be coming in July. All summer the weather had been very beautiful. From the time in May when children on Sundays came down from snow-freed upper pastures with bunches of canary-yellow primula and all the lower meadows were purple with wild salvia there had been a fragrance in the air of buttery, pine-steeped, clover-laden richness. Fresh crowds of crocus, like small white flames, had seemed to spring overnight from meadows of snow-pressed darkened grass, and after them the mauve bells of soldanella. But it was now not only very beautiful and very exhilarating but very much, after all this time, his own; and he began to look forward to showing it off to the former Miss Shortland

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and her leather-manufacturing husband: the insular small-town couple who, he thought with some amusement, could not trust themselves to book a room in a foreign country.

Presently she wrote to say that they would be coming on the seventh. 'We don't want to be caught up too much in the tourist season,' she wrote.

But on the evening of the sixth, as he came out of the hotel before dinner, he saw a vaguely familiar figure sitting at one of the terrace tables. In the woman stirring a lump of ice in a glass of vermouth he did not at first recognize the former Miss Shortland. She was plumper than he remembered her; her hips seemed wider and rather fleshy; and it was only the jet black hair, growing in the same strong and rather coarse way from her neck, that made him quiver with his first real start of recognition.

'Well!' she said. 'Do you recognize me? Do I look the same?'

'I think so -'

'You don't look a day older, Arthur. You look absolutely the same.'

'I thought you were not coming until -'

She began to laugh, rather heavily, a little fleshily, and tapped the seat of the chair next to her.

'Come and sit down. Oh! there was the most awful mess up. It was to have been the seventh and then the eighth and then we changed it to the tenth and then we very nearly didn't come at all.'

'How tiresome.'

'My husband was called away on business to Northern Ireland of all places and I even had the telegram written

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out to send to you to say that we couldn't come.'

'And hasn't he come?'

'He hopes to get here next week,' she said. 'Even then he's not sure.'

He said once again how tiresome it was, how disappointing. She rang the bell for the waiter. A flush of excitement coloured the tiny veins of her pallid cheeks and when the waiter came she said: 'I'm dying for another drink and I'm sure you are, Arthur. What will you have?'

'Please,' he said. 'I want you to have one with me.'

'No,' she said. 'No. I insist. I'm going to be firm. This is my party.'

He said it was very kind of her; she smiled and said that it was after all not every day that old friends met together. Down in the valley, through black rifts of pines, there was no sun at that hour of the day, but a white tongue of snow-water, flashing through the rock-green gorge, seemed to light up all the central deep mountain shadow.

'Isn't it absolutely wonderful up here? Cheers. Here's to us,' the former Miss Shortland said. For some reason Arthur could not bring himself to think of her as Mrs Sanderson. 'It's marvellous. I don't wonder you always live here.' She talked quickly as she drank, eyes moistly excited. 'I do envy you. Will you show it to me a little while I'm here? - I mean which mountains are which and so on? You know?'

In his attentive, woollen, almost formal way he began to say he would do his best about that; but she interrupted and said:

'What about another drink? I might as well confess I had several before you came on the scene.'

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‘No, really, I won’t. Thanks all the same.’

‘Oh! heavens, Arthur, you must. After all it’s a sort of celebration and one has to show something –’ She giggled weakly and he thought she suddenly looked middle-aged, confused, and tired, her eyes slightly bagged by fatigue, her mouth loose and uncertain as if, he thought, she had been shaken up a little by the long journey alone. He felt awkward and sorry for her and said:

‘It must be so tiresome for you, your husband not being able to come. It must be frightfully disappointing. I’m sorry.’

She rang the bell for the waiter. ‘Do you know the Sandersons? My husband is the middle one: George. Did you ever meet him?’

‘I think I knew Tom,’ he said, ‘that’s all. Wasn’t there Freddy too?’

‘Yes,’ she said. She stared down at the flashing tongue of snow-water far below. ‘Freddy, Tom, Bill, George – when you’ve met one you’ve met them all.’

That evening they sat together at the same table for dinner; afterwards they had coffee on the terrace outside, and the former Miss Shortland – out of sheer habit he kept thinking of her like that – drank brandy with her coffee and talked a great deal.

‘Oh! I do envy you this. You know what it’s like back home, don’t you? You don’t need *me* to tell you that. Oh! that town!’

‘Little towns are all much the same, aren’t they?’

‘Oh! Are they? You think so?’ She laughed heavily, her plump body creaking in the wicker chair. ‘Anyway what do we have to talk about towns for? Let’s talk about us.’

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'Us?'

'You, then,' she said. 'Tell me about you.'

It did not seem to him that there was very much he had to tell her about himself.

'You must have had the most awfully exciting things happen to you,' she said. 'I mean this rescue and that sort of thing.'

'Nothing much happens to me.'

'I don't believe it. You're so *modest*,' she said. 'You're so *quiet*. Just like you always were. You haven't changed a bit.'

He did not know what to say; she had put on a rather full open-necked dinner dress of mauve silk, floppy and fussy about the sleeves and bust: the sort of dress she would wear, he thought, to go with George Sanderson to Rotarian dances. It was quite out of place, he felt, in the little hotel. Out of its low-cut shoulders her chest and neck bulged plumply, in rolls of flesh that quivered when she laughed. And whenever she laughed that evening, as she drank her brandy, he would smile politely and awkwardly in return.

'Tell me about your *friends*,' she said. 'You can't think how I've been dying to ask you all this. I keep talking away but really I can't help it, I've got so much I want to ask you. What about your friends now?'

'I haven't made any friends.'

'Oh! that's awful, that's bad. You mean none? I imagined you gaily gallivanting about with Swiss and German women and that sort of thing.'

'I make my friends mostly among the guides.'

'How dull! No affairs?' She laughed loudly and her

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voice, cracking a little on a forced high note, split away down the rock-strewn valley. 'Even at home everybody has affairs.'

'Yes?' He sounded so astonished that once again she gave one of her loud, yapping laughs, her bust heaving as she lay back in the creaking wicker chair.

'I mean one has to,' she said. 'It's a sort of thing. One would go off one's head if one didn't break out a little bit now and then. In a town like that - '

She suddenly jumped up, holding out her hand.

'Let's walk,' she said, 'eh? Take me down the valley for a walk?'

She held his hand; her fingers were plump and moist; and as he touched them he felt a prickling in his spine.

'It's getting awfully late and I ought to be thinking about bed - '

'Bed can wait. Take me for a walk first, eh?' she said. 'Think about bed later. Think as much as you like about bed - '

She laughed again, pulling at his hand, trying to raise him up from his chair. After he had made a few clumsy and embarrassed efforts to resist she staggered and fell forward. She fell with her arms against him, leaning over him, her bust pressing down like a crinkled silk cushion on his chest.

'Take me for a walk, Arthur. Come on. It's been a long time since I walked with you.'

'I'd really rather not.' He had begun to be embarrassed by her to a point, almost, of being frightened; and now as she leaned over him, breathing heavily, with tipsy excitement, he sought desperately for excuses and said:

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'If I'm going to show you the mountains tomorrow you ought to get some rest.'

'Oh! tomorrow?' she said. 'You're going to show me them tomorrow? Which ones? Where? You didn't tell me that. It's awfully sweet of you and I didn't expect you to give up your time -'

'Of course I'll take you. I promised. But if you're going you ought -'

'You mean I can climb?'

'If you'd like, yes,' he said. 'A little way.'

'You mean ropes and axes and that sort of thing. And those big boots. I haven't got any.'

'We can probably borrow some boots for you in the hotel,' he said.

'Oh! Good. I want to climb a real mountain. Seriously.'

As she stood there looking down at him, heavy, panting, over-eager, he experienced a moment of fresh and acute embarrassment. He thought he caught a gleam of moisture in her eyes. For a horrible moment he thought she was going to cry. Instead her lips made a series of floppy trembling bites in the darkness as if trying to find the words she wanted to say; and then she dribbled:

'You've been frightfully sweet to me, Arthur. Really one doesn't know what kindness is until one needs it most, does one? You know what I mean?'

He did not, at that moment, know what she could possibly mean. A second later she gave a curious almost ugly cry of frustrated pain and rushed away.

In the morning, when he met her at breakfast she was, to his surprise and relief, extraordinarily sensible and cheerful.

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

'I'm looking forward so much to this, Arthur,' she said. 'I do value it very much.' And after breakfast:

'I see you've brought a rope, after all. Don't you trust me?'

'You get into the habit of carrying one.'

'But no axe?'

'No axe,' he said. 'We shan't be going very high. We shall be underneath the snow-line.'

Through the morning and early afternoon they climbed gently. It was mostly an affair, at first, of rock and grass. A few gentians were flowering on the slopes of upper meadows, with occasional tufts of late alpenrose. Craggs of rock, the colour of grey lava, began to rise more sheerly from scarred slopes of shale, and gradually the starch-blue cols of ice, the great shoulders of the permanent snow-line began to swing away above them, foreshortened, finally to disappear.

'It's queer how deceiving it all is,' she said.

He smiled. That, of course, was the way with beginners. The inability to estimate mountain distances, the strange illusions of height and size, the disappointment and fatigue of looking for the shoulder, the col, and the peak that never seemed to resolve: he had been through it all, they were the things one had to learn to conquer.

'How far do we go?' she said.

'We'll do the crag there. It's quite high. Are you tired? Do you want to go back? Please say.'

'Oh! no, not a bit. I'm absolutely - '

'From there you will see right across to the Niederhorn and the two lakes. Everywhere.'

The familiar name of that first mountain of his brought

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back to her a recollection of the hot night in Frau Roth's hotel; it recalled for her the hated garlic sausage, the lunatics in their straw hats, Arthur's voice as he said 'The Neiderhorn? It's a mountain,' and how, loving and hating him she had writhed on her bed in an agony of wanting him to come to her.

'Arthur, there was something I wanted to say,' she said. 'You remember up there? – at the little hotel, the first time we were here. It was awfully wrong of me to go off like that.'

He could not think of anything to say.

'It was one of those stupid things one does without thinking and then afterwards you'd give anything to change it back.'

He said 'Yes' vaguely and she went on:

'Still, everybody gets what they deserve.'

She paused and what she said afterwards seemed to hit him violently in the nape of the neck, giving him the cold creeping sensation of horror he had known when looking at her hair.

'I suppose I ought to tell you my husband was never coming here. We've sort of split up. We had an awful row and I walked out. That's why I came to you.'

He was so stunned that he began to climb on alone. By now they were nearly at the summit of the crag. In a few moments he would be able to show her the great view of the valleys, the peaks, and the lakes below. Dully, horrified, he heard her say:

'Of course there'll be awful talk and all that sort of thing but I couldn't care. If they want to say I ran away with you let them say it. After all it wouldn't be so hard –'

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The rest of what she said became simply a series of cold hammer strokes on the back of his neck. They drove him forward for some time before he was suddenly stopped by her pleading shout:

‘You’re going without me. Can’t you wait a bit?’

To his astonishment he found he had climbed thirty or forty feet alone. Behind him, small, inexpert, rather pathetic, she was clinging to a flat deep step of crag-face, paralysed by a rush of nausea. Yet it did not seem for a moment to matter very much. He was less horrified by her sickened face, white now but always rather colourless, than by what she had said and by his own lack of conscious attention. That was a terrible thing – he who had been brought up by his mother to attend so scrupulously – and he himself called back, flustered and conscience-stricken:

‘Don’t move. It’s all right. I’m coming back.’

She did not answer. As he began to climb down he thought of what he must do. It was absolutely essential to put her on the train tomorrow; he must even put himself on a train. He must do anything to end it all as swiftly as possible. It was an absolutely ghastly business and he had to say so firmly and be free.

‘I’ll be down,’ he called. ‘Just stay there.’

There would, he thought, be awful scandals and things of that sort if he did not get her back. He did not want the scandals of a little town any more than he wanted the former Miss Shortland, and suddenly the unpleasant, unwanted mess of it clotted his throat so thickly that when he looked down and saw her stuck to the rock-face like a pale blind limpet he found he could not call.

She remained there for another thirty seconds, eyes

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shut, her face drained of blood, before she swung stiffly outwards, in a slow fainting arc, and fell. Her mouth, unconscious already, did not even open to cry. She fell like a pale dummy, bumping twice against the crag-face, and then finally downwards, seventy or eighty feet below.

For a few seconds his horror was shot through, cool and clear, exultantly, with a piercing sensation of being free. He felt suddenly oblivious of the fact that the former Miss Shortland had never had any intention of bringing her husband to the Oberland; that she had come away with the simple intention of being alone with Arthur and for a time, also, like him, of being free. He was also oblivious of what, soon, they would be saying back in the little town: of how that was the sort of thing that came from living abroad too long and from old lovers trying to get together. And presently tears began to flow through him: not tears for the former Miss Shortland, but tears for his mother and the young blue-eyed Parkman, dying needlessly on a snowless crag.

He became fully aware of these things only as he climbed down. And climbing down he dipped rapidly into shadow. The afternoon was later than he thought. The sun had gone from the dark rock; and the air blew bitterly on his face from beyond the snow-line.

The Spring Hat

MISS MANKTELOW, who in desperation had begun to tint her hair a shade of unobtrusive brown, never openly expressed her opinion that the profession of millinery was better than any other. But in her heart she had always known it was.

From her small back sitting-room, where chairs and tables and even the mantelpiece were hung about with grey skulls of buckram and rolls of coloured ribbon and frayed strips of trimming, she looked out on an asphalt yard in which two cut-down beer-barrels supported the dead frames of a pair of rhododendrons. She did not remember when the rhododendrons had been planted; she knew only that they had never flowered and then had died. But one day, when she had time, she was going to take the brown skeletons of them out and in their places she was going to plant something brighter. Perhaps nasturtiums or geraniums or even tobacco plants – they would smell beautifully when the yard was dark and hot on summer evenings. She was very fond of flowers, but the constant trouble with flowers was cats. You planted something and immediately, next day, cats scratched it up again and killed it. That was the worst, she thought, of living in a neighbourhood like East Street. All its earth was asphalt. All its backyards were alive with cats and there were never any flowers.

Mrs Daley, a customer who had a large crusty head with

THE SPRING HAT

a depressed forehead and pale ears that were something like pieces of uncooked pastry pricked at the bottom with skewers, looked uneasily at a hat Miss Manktelow was finishing on a wooden block.

She was not quite sure what to think of this hat. It did not seem, she thought, to suit her character. It appeared to be rather loud for her and she said:

‘I had in mind something rather in the way of a plain velour.’

‘Velour?’ Miss Manktelow said. ‘I wouldn’t think velour was you.’

‘What Joe said was –’

‘Joe?’ Miss Manktelow said. She pricked her bottom lip as she took out of it, too hastily, one of the pins she was using for the hat.

‘How is Joe?’

The flower she was pinning on Mrs Daley’s hat was something like a cross between a trampled peony and an overblown crimson poppy. It was a little dusty in the heart but that would brush off and in the completed hat it would never be seen.

‘You know Joe,’ Mrs Daley said. ‘You know what Joe is. Joe’s always the same.’

Her voice was flat with indifference about Joe. She reached out and touched the hat. Her feeling that it was not right for her made her mouth drop loosely. A narrow gap appeared above the upper set of her false teeth and gave her a look of disjointed vacancy.

‘I’ve had the velour in my mind all winter,’ she said.

‘Winter – yes, that’s all right,’ Miss Manktelow said.

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

‘In winter I grant you. But you want a bit more colour now spring is here.’

In the yard and beyond it, in East Street, there was no sign of spring. On the tarred fence a brown cat was crouching, and the wind of February prickled its fur. A fog of black smoke hung about the bakery. The bakery was also an outdoor beer-house and there were all sorts of sounds that came from it that Miss Manktelow knew well. Beer barrels rolling in the side jetty. Men’s voices. Shovels scraping on the bakehouse floor.

She was familiar also with the sound of Joe Daley, laughing with the baker.

‘The thing to do is to try it,’ she said. She took the last of the pins from her mouth. Under the flabby flower of crimson and dusty black the entire hat on its wooden skull was submerged. ‘That’s the only way.’

Joe Daley was a large man with fierce pink flesh and light dancing blue eyes that because of their vivacity seemed to stick out, like a shrimp’s, from the front of his head. In summer the beer-house was cool. In winter the bakehouse was always fiery and snug, and nearly always Joe was there. People were not permitted drink in the beer-house because it had an off-licence only, but there was nothing to prevent the baker and Joe Daley having bottles of beer in the bakehouse at the back. They had many bottles of beer there and sometimes Joe stayed for the night-baking. He and the baker laughed over the beer while the bread was cooking and Miss Manktelow, waking, could hear them from her room.

‘This is temporary,’ she said, ‘nothing is fixed.’

When she put the hat on Mrs Daley’s head the large

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dough-like ears supported it uncertainly. In a strange fashion the flower made Mrs Daley look heavier, older, more misshapen than before.

‘I fancy the flower wants to be further up,’ Miss Manktelow said. ‘That will give you a bit of height. That’s what you need.’

Mrs Daley was small in all ways except for her head and ears. Miss Manktelow did not understand how a large healthy boisterous man like Joe Daley came to fall for a woman so undersized. She did not know how people fell for each other anyway. It was a mystery how one person got into the way of being entranced or familiar with another.

‘Let’s try it there.’ The flower, fixed high on the crown of the hat, seemed as big as a train signal. ‘I’ll just pin it and you can see what you feel.’

Joe was extraordinary, always laughing. Miss Manktelow was fond of having new bread and cocoa at night. And sometimes, about ten o’clock, when she went into the bakehouse to fetch bread fresh and hot from the oven, Joe would be there. That would be the first baking. The air would be strong with the heat of the bakehouse, the smell of bread, and the laughter of Joe. There would be a yeasty smell of baking and beer, the loud boisterous blowing laugh of Joe as he sprawled in a floury chair.

‘I feel as if I’m going to over-balance,’ Mrs Daley said, ‘with the flower all that much on one side –’

‘I don’t think so,’ Miss Manktelow said. ‘Don’t let that worry you –’

When Mrs Daley peered into the mirror above the

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mantelpiece she saw the critical face of Miss Manktelow rise above her shoulder.

‘Now forget that it’s you,’ Miss Manktelow said. ‘Try to imagine it’s someone else. Detach yourself and look at the hat.’

Mrs Daley looked at the top-heavy familiar reflection of herself with an expression of troubled uncertainty. She could not imagine she was anyone else and her mouth fell open again. She felt insecure and touched the side of the flower, pushing it up a little, and Miss Manktelow said:

‘No, no. Not too much. I think it’s right as it is.’

‘I fancy it ought to go more in the middle –’

‘Well, let’s try in the middle then. We can but try.’

The flower, set in the middle of the hat, seemed to pull down the entire front of Mrs Daley’s face into a puzzled scowl. Mrs Daley’s hair was spidery and grey. Pieces of it stuck out from under the hat like straying sheep’s wool, making her look as if she wore a wig that did not sit correctly.

Miss Manktelow said she thought the flower in the middle of the hat looked marvellous. She felt it was just the thing. ‘It gives balance,’ she said. ‘And yet there’s just that touch.’

Mrs Daley fingered the hat, the flower, and bits of her hair uncertainly, as if wondering exactly what that touch could be. Miss Manktelow thought of Joe.

There had once been an evening when Joe had been extra boisterous in the bakehouse, full of extraordinary larks.

She often thought of that evening. Joe was sitting on the dough-board in his shirt sleeves. You never knew what

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Joe was going to say to you next and that evening he had kept on calling her Miss Mangeltoe. It was the way he said it that was so funny and every few moments he roared with laughter. For a time she did her best not to laugh. Her name after all was rather an exceptional one; she was in a profession; she did not want to lower herself at all. She had once heard someone say too that her name was French and that it was possibly a corruption of something like *Manque de l'eau*, whatever that meant.

But after Joe had called her Miss Mangeltoe several times she could not help herself and began laughing. At first she tittered and then Joe gave a shriek of laughter, the beginning of which she saw plainly, a series of stirring tremulous flutters, in the great strong belly above the tops of his trousers.

After that she could not keep her face straight. Joe roared and kept slapping his fat thighs with both hands. There were beads of yeasty beer on his mouth, a tipsy flare in his blue eyes, and a smell of fire and baking in the air. She felt the laughter, the warmth, and the way Joe called her Miss Mangeltoe having a strange effect on her. It fired her, although she laughed so much, into a curious sadness that became an ache above her heart.

Then another disturbing and in fact almost terrifying thing had happened. All at once Joe, swinging his legs excitedly under the dough-table, said he would take her home.

‘Could we try it plain?’ Mrs Daley said, ‘without the flower?’

Miss Manktelow stuck pins into her mouth and again she felt one of them sharply prick her lips.

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‘It’s nothing without the flower,’ she said. ‘The flower is *it*. It’s the whole point of the hat. You can see for yourself if we put it on the block.’

On the block, that was so like a bony and skinless skull, the hat did not look more ugly than when it sat on Mrs Daley’s flabby, paste-like ears. Mrs Daley stared at it with open mouth, in dismay, her false teeth dropping weakly. She said that Joe had all the time fancied her in a velour, that all the time that had been Joe’s idea.

‘Men never know about hats,’ Miss Manktelow said.

Mrs Daley had cut her hair in an old-fashioned bob that had the effect of shortening her stature still further now that she had taken off the hat. Looking at it, Miss Manktelow wondered again how on earth a man like Joe could fall for a person who looked so dwarf and crushed and she said:

‘I think I’ve got it. I think I’ve got the answer. We’ll put the flower at the back.’

She had thought again and again of that evening when Joe had said he would take her home. She wondered what might have happened if she had taken him into the house. She had never been able to make up her mind whether he meant it or not. Joe was always larking of course. Perhaps he was drunk. You never quite knew with Joe. But he had in fact actually jumped off the dough-board; he had actually taken her by the arm and pretended he was ready.

‘At the back,’ she said to Mrs Daley. ‘I’m perfectly sure that that’s the answer.’

She remembered Joe roaring with laughter and winking at the baker and saying: ‘We’re ready. Eh, Fred? We’re ready. Only got to get Miss Mangeltow ready now, Fred,

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and then we're all set. That right, Fred? Always got to get the lady ready.'

She did not think it could have been a joke; but then again, she often told herself, it could have been and perhaps it was. All the same she wondered what might have happened. Joe in the dark house, Joe having another glass of beer and a plate of bread and cheese, Joe talking and laughing among the trimmings and hats and skulls. Joe alone with her. Joe saying he was ready and pulling her leg and calling her Miss Mangeltoe. She could never be quite certain that what she imagined might not have been real. There was no way of saying it might not have happened.

The hat, without the flower at the front, sat on Mrs Daley more hideously than ever; but when Mrs Daley looked into the mirror again she was aware only of a sense of relief because she could not see the flower.

'I think that's better,' she said. 'Heaps. I like it better like that.'

'It's always a question of trying things one way and the other until you get the thing that fits the personality,' Miss Manktelow said.

She had learnt all that during her years with Curtis and Co. You had to make the personality fit the hat. Naturally customers resisted and had their own ideas but they never really knew what was best for them. That was why they were always rushing back and changing hats because they did not fit their change of mood. Women were stupid about hats. They simply never knew.

She had learned all those things at Curtis and Co. She had been a very promising girl there. She had wanted to

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get on. But somehow things had not turned out very brightly. One way or another they had never quite clicked. She had started up on her own in the back room and somehow had never got out of it. The truth was you needed capital and influence to get on.

‘Now we’ve got it right,’ she said, ‘I’ll sew it on.’

Mrs Daley, wearing the hat at last, gave off a terribly troubled impression of twofold misfortune. There was something naked and unfinished about the hat as seen from the front. Her ears protruded grossly, like two pale gargoyles deformed and wrinkled. From the back the flower seemed as if hooked to the wrong hat and then forgotten.

‘I don’t think it will need altering,’ Miss Manktelow said. ‘I don’t think it will need a touch.’

‘I hope to goodness Joe won’t hate it,’ Mrs Daley said.

From the street-side window Miss Manktelow watched Mrs Daley blown beyond the bakehouse, across East Street, by the February wind. There was no sign of spring in East Street. The hat was altogether too large for Mrs Daley and seemed to rock on her ears. In the wind Mrs Daley looked ugly and comfortless and held the hat with one hand as if feeling it was top-heavy and did not belong to her and would blow away.

Through the back window Miss Manktelow stared at the yard. The rhododendrons were stark and hideous and would have to come out this spring. She removed the naked wooden skull from the table and thought of the bakehouse at night, of Joe laughing and of the smell of bread and fire.

She turned and looked at her face in the mirror. It really

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wasn't a bad face, she thought. She really couldn't understand how a man like Joe could fall for a face so crushed and out of proportion as Mrs Daley's, with those enormous ears and the scraggle of bleached grey hair.

She lifted the front of her own hair with her fingers. The new streak of grey growing out from the roots was something she would have to tint in when she went to bed. How did people fall for each other? How did it come about that a man preferred one face to another?

In the yard the brown cat leapt from the fence, driven by a black tom-cat that slid like a panther behind the rhododendrons. In rage Miss Manktelow saw the flash of its reflection in the mirror and rushed to the window, beating on it angrily.

'Psst!' she shouted. 'Psst! You big black brute! – go home! Psst! Psst! Get out! – go home!'

That was what killed things, she thought. That's what made it impossible to have any flowers.

'Psst!' she said. She spat with angry breath against the glass. 'Psst! Go home, you brute!' It was no wonder you could never have anything. 'Psst! Psst! – go home where you belong. Psst! – you great ugly thing!'

In hatred Miss Manktelow glared at the cat; and the cat, with green-proud eyes, glared back at Miss Manktelow.

An Island Princess

THEY called her a schooner. She looked more than anything else like a big squat butter-churn sawn in half from end to end, painted white, and roofed over with a kitchen table to protect her deck from the sun. In the middle of the deck was a sort of bung-hole, from the darkness of which rose strange engine belchings, blue clouds of oil fume and faint odours of long-dead fish.

'She's due to sail at half past eight,' people said. 'Be on the quayside at ten.'

At a quarter past ten the only passengers were two Tahitian women who lay on the decks in fright, heads covered by scarves, bare feet tucked into the skirts of their white and scarlet *pereus*. The crew, consisted of a swarthy little Frenchman in battered white peak-cap, a crumpled-looking engineer whose dark-lined yellow skin had something of the look of an ageing banana skin, and a twenty-three-stone mate with a belly as broad as the schooner beam, hands like gigantic brown claws and a vast one-tooth smile.

At half past ten they were still loading bicycles. At twenty minutes to eleven the captain walked away down the waterfront, spent some time in the offices of the Pacific Navigation and Tourist Agency, and presently came back to drink fresh coconut juice with two friends at a stall shaded by three sacks, several palm fronds, and two strips of corrugated iron.

Just before eleven One-Tooth and the engineer still had

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to load four crates, half a dozen sticks of bananas, several sacks of flour, a pen of ducks, a stack of boxes, eight barrels of wine, two canisters of film, and a horse.

Gradually, as these things were loaded on, the schooner sank an inch or two lower in the water. By the time the wine had been lowered into the mysterious spaces of the bung-hole she seemed ready to submerge. But it was when the horse was strapped to a sort of bamboo trellis on the starboard side and then began stampeding, trying to kick holes in the deck, that a real list began.

‘All we need now is One-Tooth,’ I said. ‘Then she’ll be awash.’

Soon after eleven we were almost ready. One-Tooth and the engineer were having a last drink of coconut juice under the shade of the corrugated iron and the captain was signing chits for six spare bicycle tyres brought by a Chinaman in a truck. The passengers now consisted of my wife, myself, the two frightened women, a mother and father with three children, a Frenchman reading *La Vie Parisienne*, two priests, an elderly Tahitian woman with a bunch of marigolds, the pen of ducks, and the horse.

‘Let’s be thankful for the priests,’ I said.

Two minutes later One-Tooth jumped aboard and lowered her another inch in the oily waters of the harbour. The engineer followed him and disappeared down the bung-hole. One-Tooth lifted the gang-plank aboard and began hauling up the anchor. The engine burst into a shuddering roar and the captain, as if thinking that he might perhaps be short of a passenger, a duck, or possibly even a horse, took one last look round the deck, idly counting the heads.

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At the same moment someone began yelling on the quayside. I looked shorewards and saw a big, magnificent, expansive Tahitian girl, a large crimson hibiscus in her hair, riding with splendid brown legs astride the pillion of a policeman's motor-cycle.

With red mouth wide open and head thrown back, she was exploding in handsome laughter.

'Tereu,' the captain said. One-Tooth stopped hauling in the anchor. 'Tereu,' he said, laughing, 'Tereu!' he shouted. The engineer lifted his banana-skin face from the fumes of bung-hole and laughed too. 'Tereu,' he said. 'Tereu!' he shouted. '*Comment ça va*, Tereu?'

A moment later they had the gang-plank out for her and she was coming aboard. She crossed the plank in three splendid strides, jumping down on the deck between ducks, horse, priests and frightened women with what I thought were noises, half in French, half in Tahitian, of glorious blasphemy.

Hearing her, the captain, One-Tooth and the engineer roared with laughter.

'Since when did the boat start early?' she said in French. 'Couldn't you sleep well?'

She pushed past the horse, giving it a slap on the rump, its bony carcase trembling against the trellis-work.

'Ballast?' she said and for a second time exploded in magnificent, handsome laughter.

A minute later we were heading out to sea. Even in the calm waters of the lagoon the schooner rolled like a butter-churn. At the gap in the reef she pitched against the great pressing wall of the incoming Pacific, jolting the ribs of the horse against the sides. Her bows rose against

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the long deep swell, leaving her wallowing in blue-grey troughs capped with sun-white ocean spume. Against the towering crests of the reef she looked smaller, felt uglier, and seemed more barrel-like than ever, slogging her slow way to a sky-line of island mountains.

Now and then, out to sea, a shark exploded the water surface with a great lash. But it was never a more startling sight than the sight of Tereu, golden shoulders and chest bare as far as the sweep of her sumptuous breasts, head thrown back, hair sweeping down past her hard fine hips like a black plaitless horse mane, superb smooth legs naked as far as her thighs, which she sat hugging with her hands.

All the time she kept up her running expansive fire of laughter with the captain, One-Tooth, and the engineer. One-Tooth, in laughter, was like a grinning gargoyle. His vast bladder of a paunch quivered below the yellow folds of his navel-line like half-set jelly. And once, in the middle of some grosser, more explosive joke between them, I saw her slap him there with her open hand.

Somehow, in all this, she rode in the bows of the lumping schooner with dignity, like a scarlet and white figure-head with gold-leaf flesh, jet black hair, and a certain nobleness about the deep brown eyes.

Two hours later we were tying up inside an island reef, at a little wooden jetty, the first of several stopping places.

On the jetty two long-haired girls in *pereus* were selling big slices of melon in two varieties, one pink, one sugar-brown. All the passengers, including the two priests, the two frightened women, and Tereu, got off the schooner

NOW THE SLEEPS CRIMSON PETAL

and started sucking melon, leaving us alone on deck with the ducks, the bunch of marigolds, and the horse. One Tooth, the captain, and the engineer unloaded three barrels of wine, six sacks of flour, and the canisters of film. Then they too went ashore to suck melon, pressing their faces into the big pink and brown black-seeded slices.

‘Hey! You’re English, aren’t you? Don’t you like water melon?’

It was Tereu, sucking pink water melon, laughing up at us.

‘Very much.’

‘Then why the hell don’t you come down and eat some?’ Her English, throaty, slightly American in accent suddenly changed to a well-bred drawl. ‘Or don’t you care to awfully much? I mean to say – not done, old boy?’

Since she mocked us, I mocked her back.

‘Not frightfully.’

‘Oh! I say,’ she said. ‘Too-too. Most awfully too-too. Don’t you think so?’

‘Absolutely,’ I said.

‘Too gorgeous,’ she said.

‘Too simply stunning,’ I said. ‘I mean to say.’

She burst into laughter, choked by pink melon flesh spitting out a mouthful of black seed which floated down through the clear crystalline blue water, where even blue fish swam in slow shoals against the schooner bows.

‘Oh! come off it,’ she said. ‘Which colour do you want?’ She threw the rind of her own melon into the water. ‘Pink or brown?’

‘Brown please. It’s very kind of you.’

‘Brown it is,’ she said. ‘I’m coming aboard.’

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She came back on board, graciously bearing us sweet wet slices of gold-brown melon. As we sucked at them I looked at her large, dark, and now quite dignified eyes.

'Where did you get that too-too?' I said.

'Fiji. San Francisco,' she said. 'Places.'

Now, sitting in the bows, shoulders shining in the sun, head outlined against the background of palm and mountain, she spoke easily, gracefully, and with calm.

'You're going to stay with the Longmores, aren't you?' she said.

'How did you know?'

'Oh! everybody stays with the Longmores,' she said. 'Do you know them well?'

'Not at all.'

'Oh! that's neither here nor there in Tahiti,' she said. 'In Tahiti you don't need introductions.'

'Are you staying with the Longmores too?' I said.

'No,' she said. 'I get off before that. The next stop but one.'

In flashing sunlight, through calm blue water, we glided up the lagoon. After the next stopping place One-Tooth, the captain, and the engineer began eating bread and bananas and drinking *vin ordinaire* from dark green bottles. One-Tooth opened his black gargoyle mouth, poured in a stream of wine, wiped the bottle-neck on his shirt, and then held the bottle up, roaring with laughter.

'Tereu? Huh?' he said. '*Petit peu?*'

Tereu took the bottle and drank too, afterwards almost drowning the beat of the engines with the long throaty roll of her handsome laughter.

All the time the shores of the lagoon, white-sanded,

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

with high curtains of palm, and above them the fantastic chimney mountains forested to the tips, floated past us, hot, profoundly still, and without a sound.

‘Something along here I’d like to show you,’ she said.

Two minutes later she was pointing shorewards to where, among clusters of red and yellow croton, banana fronds, orange trees, and a few tangled bushes of tiare and frangipani, a framework of roofless and fire-blackened bamboo, once a house, stood against the shore.

‘My house,’ she said. ‘Was my house, I should say.’

The bamboo skeleton faded slowly away from us like a washed-up wreck.

‘Built it myself,’ she said, ‘with my last fifty dollars.’

Across the lagoon a shoal of tiny fish, chased by another, rose clearer out of the water like a flock of silver birds. Still staring at the house, she did not notice them.

‘All I had left after San Francisco. Wouldn’t have had that if I hadn’t left it with Longmore before I sailed.’

We were coming in, now, to another white-painted jetty, glittering in the sun.

‘Nice in San Francisco,’ she said. ‘Had to fall in love there too. Whale of a time. Blued everything. Every cent I had. All or nothing with me. Worth it, though. What do you say?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Oh! absolutely,’ she said. ‘Always all or nothing with me. Too terrific.’ She laughed again, loud and throatily. ‘All I had was the fifty dollars. Then all I had was the house. Then one day I burnt that down.’ Again she roared with laughter, her strong rich tongue quivering. ‘Too awful. Too absolutely awful don’t you know. The end.’

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When she got off at the next landing-stage One-Tooth, the captain, and the engineer waved their hands to her in fond good-bye. In return she threw kisses to the schooner, said good-bye several times in four languages, including her two sorts of English, and stood golden, sumptuous and laughing in the sun.

'Good-bye!' she said. 'Love to the Longmores,' and her voluptuous handsome laughter rolled to the end of the lagoon, echoing in the mountains.

'*Au revoir, Tereu,*' the captain shouted. '*À bientôt. Au revoir, princesse.*'

'Happy girl,' I said.

That evening, at the Longmore house, we ate a curry of fresh-water shrimps, with red wine, on the edge of a lagoon, under a sky full of soft Pacific stars.

'Yes,' Longmore said. 'Tereu is a princess.'

'A very handsome one too,' I said. 'A happy girl.'

'Not happy.'

'With all that laughter?' I said. 'I've never heard such laughter.'

'It's possible to laugh too much.'

Across the dark lagoon, among the stars, islanders were fishing with little flares, like roaming fire-flies.

'Yes,' he said, 'she laughs too much. She never laughed like that. Not before she went away.'

After dinner I stood alone for some time and looked down across the lagoon where, in the afternoon, shoals of little fish had leapt for their lives like birds. Everywhere the stars were clear and splendid above the mountains.

'Very stupid of me, Tereu,' I said. 'Too stupid. Too, too stupid.'

NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

All across the profound stillness of the lagoon I fancie
I could hear, once again, the throaty, sumptuous, rolling
handsome laughter.

‘All or nothing,’ I thought. ‘*Au revoir, princesse.*’

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